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## **Connecting the Local, National and Transnational Powers of a Religious Youth Organisation in Berlin**

by

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### **Abstract**

The paper considers the ‘turn to Islam’ among the contemporary youth with migrant background partly as an urban phenomenon. A city offers a variety of religious spaces representing different religious orientations and congregations providing particular infrastructures. It represents an empirical example of how a religious ‘faith community’, “Muslim Youth in Germany”, shape Muslim youth’s religious identification. Turning to a religious identity in the urban space is not simply a consequence of alienation due to anonymity and weakening of community structures when moving from the rural to the urban. Rather, cities offer mobilizing opportunities for religious organizations to situate their message in the urban social antagonism and positions. The weekly religious youth meetings are connected to the national and transnational level through organizational aspects, religious authorities, authoritative subjects, and by the youth’s transnational travels. At the local level, messages, knowledge, ideas and perceptions from around the world made available through the new technology, is discussed, rejected, modified and negotiated. The paper examines how the variety of religious spaces in the urban Berlin make it possible for these youth to pursue a more individual and privatized orientation towards Islam within a ‘faith community’ which combines the local, national and transnational in new agglomerates.

### **Introduction**

The so-called pluralism and individual appropriation of the religious tradition among young Muslims born in the European society is suggested by several researchers (Babès 1997; Roy 2004; Saint-Blancat 1997). Most situate this process to secularization and the European social environment (Cesari 2004; Amiraux 2006; Boubekeur 2005). Clearly, without centralizing institutions defining *the* authoritative doctrines, Muslims continue to act within an

increasingly pluralistic, modern society in ways that are multiple, varied and sometimes inconsistent (Casanova 2001). Simultaneously, religious ‘faith communities’ continue to play an important role as spaces where religious knowledge, values and norms are not only mediated, but also negotiated.

The religious youth organisation ‘Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland e.V.’ (“Muslim Youth in Germany”, from hereon MJD), comprising approximately 50 branches German wide, is the second largest Muslim youth organisation in Germany, after Milli Görüs (IGMG). The paper suggests first, how this religious ‘faith community’ continuously shape Muslim youth’s religious identification and second, how this youth organisation connects religious knowledge, consumption and ideas from the transnational, national and local level.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Local Level**

‘Youth’ are the main focus of MJD. The main concern of this Muslim youth organisation is situated at two levels: at the local level it offers a space which combine being young *and* religiously active; at the national level MJD takes on a public role to situate Islam in Germany through dialogue with politicians, journalists, and interfaith projects.<sup>2</sup>

Established in 1994, MJD is directly inspired from a similar youth group based in the United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Fatima (31)<sup>4</sup> recalls sitting around a camp-fire discussing: “Would it not be great if living in Hamburg, but going to Aachen you would know where you can find other young Muslims who are actively practicing their religion?” One of the main reasons why MJD was established, according to Fatima, was dissatisfaction with the mosques and organisations established by their parents. Despite internal modifications in late 1990s, the structures mostly remained ethnically and nationally determined, anchored in national ties to their country of origin, instead of to the world wide Muslim community, the *umma*.

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<sup>1</sup> The data for this paper arrives from a longer time fieldwork (March 2005 – June 2007) with 40 young female Muslims in Berlin, many of who participate in MJD. During this period of time, I participated in the weekly meetings and the regular events organised by MJD. This was part of my PhD thesis “‘It’s like doing SMS to Allah’. Young Female Muslims Crafting a Religious Self in Berlin” to be submitted February 2009.

<sup>2</sup> MJD states their goal as “to integrate Muslim youth by providing an opportunity to develop their creativity and talents as young German Muslims in the German language”. Own translation from the German from leaflet *Selbstdarstellung der Muslimischen Jugend in Deutschland e.V*, April 2003. See also homepage of MJD, [www.mjd-net.de](http://www.mjd-net.de), accessed 23.10.06.

<sup>3</sup> Similar Muslim youth organisations exist in Austria, Italy, France, Sweden and Norway. MJD is represented at the European level by FEMYSO (Forum European Muslim Youth and Student Organisation), established in Leicester (UK) in 1996.

<sup>4</sup> All names have been altered according to correct ethical guidelines protecting the anonymity of interviewees and conversational partners.

Growing up in the 1990s, Fatima experienced that her peers found the mosques boring and many participated only to respect their parents (cf. Babès 1997 in France; Jacobsen 2006 in Norway). The religious lectures were given in the language of their parents, which not all of the youth are fluent in, and the imams were largely unfamiliar with the German situation. Fatima, and other religiously active youth, feared the negative impact this could have on the religiosity of their own generation.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the creation of new structures of learning should open up for new ways of identifying as Muslims in Germany.<sup>6</sup>

MJD exemplifies a generational shift in the practise of Islam in Europe, due to their approach to Islam and their teaching methods. Particularly four aspects are unique. First, it is ‘multi-culti’- that is, its’ members are inter-ethnic.<sup>7</sup> Most members of the group in Berlin are born or raised in Germany with parents from different nationalities, including Bosnia, Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, and Sudan.<sup>8</sup> An important aim is that the youth should identify themselves foremost as Muslims, and then potentially by ethnicity or nationality. Second, the organisation is German speaking. Most of the participants feel more proficient in the German language. In focus is to change the idea that to be both German and Muslim is an oxymoron. The ideology behind MJD embraces the thought that Islam should be a path and a possible way to integrate, without assimilating, in the German society. Third, the organisation has an elected *shura* (consultation/committee), but is independent from mosques and does not employ *imams* (prayer leader). Instead the young Muslims make references to the Koran, to books, *hadiths* (the stories or traditions based on Mohammed’s life), the internet and TV. Forth, it is

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<sup>5</sup> Fatima further expressed a feeling that religious education in the institution of family had failed, and that this was partly because the generation in Germany is the ‘Atatürk generation’ which had not received a ‘proper religious education’. In her opinion the elder generation lacks pedagogic capabilities because they were uneducated and tended to mix religion with traditional customs from their villages.

<sup>6</sup> MJD appeals to both religiously active and non-active young men and women (so-called ‘born Muslims’) by inviting pop-star Sami Yusuf (former Cat Stevens) and Ammar 114 (a German converted Hip Hoper) to ‘Islam Connecting People’ events, and by arranging graffiti workshops in mosques. This generation of well-educated and socially active youth has been called ‘pop-Muslims’ (cf. Gerlach 2006), a term the paper take distance from of two main reasons; first, many of the youth I worked with discussed this book and felt that this terminology did not respect them and their activities; second, the term not only neglects, but also take our attention away from, how the religiosity of the youth is part of a complex processes where the youth actively interact with religious sources.

<sup>7</sup> In Berlin, the term ‘multi-culti’ is politically ‘thick’, most often related to migration and integration policies directed towards youth with migrant background living in Berlin and initiatives to ‘integrate’ them. The youth make use of this term about themselves, mostly in a positive manner, and sometimes in a joking way.

<sup>8</sup> The group is also frequented by mix-marriage children (i.e. mother German and father Egyptian) and converted Germans.

organised *by* and *for* young people (15 to 30 years old) and the weekly local meetings are prepared by the participants.<sup>9</sup>

### **Bringing in the Urban**

The local fractions have gender divided weekly meetings, one day for the males (the ‘brothers’), another for the females (‘sisters’).<sup>10</sup> The majority of its participants are not living in Kreuzberg, but in other parts of Berlin, including Neukölln, Wedding and Spandau.<sup>11</sup> In the weekly meetings the females read together from the Koran in the Arabic language, followed by a German translation, and power point presentations on the contemporary value of different *hadith* to their own lives in Germany. In the teaching of Islam, they make use of book sources which address Islam in a universal way, including sacred texts like the Koran. During the seminars, the teaching and practice of Islam take place within the quest for the ‘real’ or ‘true’ Islam in contrast to the Islam of their parents, which the youth judge as mixed with ‘tradition’ (cf. Karakasoglu-Aydin 2000; Nökel 2002; Roy 2004; Venel 1999).<sup>12</sup>

The focus on knowledge and self-discipline as the ‘correct way’ to Islam can be found among youth in several European societies (cf. Jacobsen 2006; Sahlin 2003) and also in Islamic movements in Turkey and Egypt (Mahmood 2005). This particular religious consciousness can be understood as realised through a process of modernization, where expansion of literacy and education contribute to diminish the dependence on more traditional defined religious authorities to make sense of ones religion (Eickelman and Piscatori 1992; Ismail 2004).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A high proportion of MJD participants belong to an upwardly mobile part of the migrant population either because of their parents’ education, or because of their own success in the German educational system. The organisational structure of the organisation can perhaps explain the popularity among educated youth; participants are expected to contribute with religious presentations and in discussions on the understandings of the religious knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> A weekly meeting in Berlin gathers often not more than 10 female youth, although the annual national meetings must set a participation limit of approximately 1200. According to the official membership numbers there are 600 members nationwide (in 2007), of which 2/3 are females. This does not correspond with the youth actually participating at the meetings. Some Muslim youth groups situated within different mosques and organizations are unofficially attached to the MJD and the organization is active in German media and public life at the national level. Consequently, the relevance of the group is far greater than its membership numbers might indicate.

<sup>11</sup> The highest density of inhabitants with Muslim orientation in Berlin is in Neukölln, Wedding and Kreuzberg.

<sup>12</sup> Recent research on Muslim youth in Europe has generally indicated an increase of the idea of a ‘pure’ Islam among the younger generation versus a ‘traditional’ or ‘cultural’ Islam that is mostly practiced by their parents’ generation (Roy 2004: 36).

<sup>13</sup> The organization has some similarities also to the *da’wa* movement in Egypt which Mahmood studied (1998, 2002, 2005) in terms of its pedagogy, its attraction among women, and politic of pioussness. In Egypt, however, the *da’wa* movement includes setting up of neighborhood mosques, Islamic educational institutions and printing presses, and social welfare organizations. For the renaissance of *da’wa* movements in Muslim societies, see also Metcalf (1982) and Peacock (1978).

The youth also bring in the local, urban context in which they live at the weekly meetings. Since 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 the media, both national and globally, and the German political focus on Islam and ‘Muslims’ have been framed in a stereotypical way, where in particular women with headscarves are viewed as either ‘traditional’ and ‘unwilling to integrate’, or ‘victims’ of Muslim men’s suppression. This leads sometimes to uncomfortable and discriminatory everyday situations in the German sphere for these youth. As a counteraction, the MJD leaders sometimes initiate role-plays or workshops on how to best answer ‘typical’ questions they are confronted with, such as: “What do you say when someone is coming up to you and ask if it isn’t warm under the headscarf?” At one weekly meeting, for example, the MJD group constructed a role-play on how to best react in urban situations:

Introducing the role play, the leader Fadwa (23) says: “This one is on subway, we all know this situation” Nawar (17): “Ah, yes, finally at a specific place and also the subway - such an important place.” Hamida is volunteering and Fadwa instructs her: “You are sitting on the subway, and we are non-Muslims and you are yourself.” Two of the girls start staring at Hamida, whispering to each other, and continue to stare [though they are both shy and so they sometimes only laugh]. “Just a second”, Hamida is saying, reaching for her mobile phone and are putting the headphones to her mobile in her ears: “I forgot this! I am always listening to music on the subway, so that I don’t hear what they are saying.” One of the girls says: “She is doing the right thing”. The role play is followed by discussion on how the others would react in such a situation, which all of the young females recognised.

This sort of role-play can be understood as practicing how to react and feel more secure in the urban space, as a kind of ‘tactic’ (de Certeau 1984).<sup>14</sup> Commenting that Hamida is doing ‘the right thing’ indicates that ignoring the gazes or talk can sometimes be the best solution. Through similar practices, the women learn how to be ‘streetwise’ (Anderson 1990), developing a kind of ‘street etiquette’, ‘cultural capital’ (cf. Bourgois 2003: 135) or a ‘savoir faire’ which they can apply in different situations.<sup>15</sup> Knowing how to behave in public is more than relating to faceless others, or merely accepting the stereotyping and negative gazes. Learning how to behave on the streets within a ‘safe’ space, the youth develop a ‘condition of self’ in public. The feeling of mastering situations on the street, which is the aim of this

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<sup>14</sup> Goffman argues on the importance of practicing: “In a performer’s acquisition of a particular competence, the first step attempted is often easier and simpler than any he will take in the serious world (...). The first phase of training thus affords the learner some protection from the anxiety produced by incompetent performances (...)” (Goffman 1974: 64-65).

<sup>15</sup> This ‘cultural capital’ is distinguished from Bourdieu’s cultural capital in that it to a small degree is translatable between different social fields.

'rehearsal' tactics (de Certeau 1984), can provide the youth with some feelings of safety or self-confidence. The organisers of MJD recognise that social interaction on the street is not an abstract space, but rather a place sutured of social codes and possible uncertain interactions and that social practice is something one can learn.

Such micro politics on street communication take different forms. For example, at one MJD meeting Leila (21) is having a presentation when she says:

“When we are sitting in the underground and there are no other Muslims, one feels like an outsider and does not dare to take the Koran out to read. Why are we ashamed of ourselves to do that? People are looking anyways.” Leila then refers to a verse in the Koran and a history from the life of Muhammad where the moral is that one should be proud to be who one is, also in front of other people. She says: “What did Umar Ibn al-Khattab [the second Caliph] do when he took up [converted to] Islam or what did a young man do at a university – praying in the middle of the university? When everyone is doing this, there is a (positive) chain reaction. Trust yourself. Just do it.”<sup>16</sup>

Leila makes here a direct link between historical time and today: born in the year 580 Umar converted the same day as he planned to assassinate Muhammad and became later the second Caliph (634-644). Accordingly, his conversion improved the confidence of the Muslims to practice Islam openly as nobody dared to obstruct Umar's prayer at the Ka'abah. Daring to perform their religious praxis visually in the street can also influence other Muslims to perform their religion openly. The emphasis within the youth group that it is 'normal' to be a practising Muslim openly is the starting point of an effort to take Islam into the public sphere and out of an abnormal position. Visibility of their practice of Islam becomes here a feature of the struggle of recognition in where visibility can become a source of power and the invisibility or suppression of the visible act becomes a sign of subjugation (cf. Fraser 1999: 119).

### **Local, National and Transnational Connections**

The general structure of this religious youth organisation consists of a ten member *shura*, which meet each other regularly in different German cities or towns.<sup>17</sup> It is responsible for all

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<sup>16</sup> Notice here the similarity to the 'Nike' commercial "Just do it".

<sup>17</sup> Currently the *shura* consists of fifty per cent male and females, which are elected every two years by a membership meeting.

MJD activities and represents the MJD nationwide.<sup>18</sup> The MJD sends out nationwide Friday emails, arranges regional and national monthly and annual seminars targeting Muslims from all over Germany. New branches in cities or towns is either initiated centrally, meaning that MJD target an area for a new establishment, or youth approach the *shura* with a wish to establish a MJD-branch in their region. These youth will then receive guidance and advice from the *shura*, a branch handbook with guidelines, and proposals to participate at seminars for religious education and youth leader seminars.

The organisation is not promoting ready fixed designed religious instructions, but draws on a variety of transnational (charismatic) figures which they believe follow an “Islam of the middle way”, including Tariq Ramadan, Yusuf al-Quardawi, and the Egyptian television preacher Amr Khalid.<sup>19</sup> The messages of these authorities are not followed entirely; whereas some aspects of al-Quardawi’s teachings, such as “women are allowed to travel alone” is pursued, his ideas on the situation of Palestinians is rejected. Furthermore, whereas some members respect Khalid’s profile, other members will find him objectionable and too populist. Like most organisations, MJD has developed a particular organisational culture or content, which the new *shura* will carry on, but also modify.<sup>20</sup> The local branches are connected to the national level not only through the larger national meetings, but also through the handbook on how to arrange their weekly meetings, and through use of the professional and continuous updated MJD homepages. Further, in case of problems with the local government or a local mosque the national *shura* will send someone to that area to aid the local MJD representative.

## **Transnational Islamic Consumption**

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<sup>18</sup> The execution of the assignments is delegated to the different AG – working groups within which the youth are organised.

<sup>19</sup> Authorities such as the controversial Swiss Tariq Ramadan, the Egyptian TV star Amr Khaled, and Yusuf al Quardawi, and the use of new technologies, including satellite TV and the World Wide Web, become relevant both during the meeting and outside. Yusuf al-Quaradawi is considered as one of the main intellectual characters in the contemporary Islamic Revival (Mahmood 2005: 61). The style of Khalid, in particular, is youthful with his clean shaven face, dressed in jeans and polo shirts or in suit and necktie. Bayat suggests that he “simultaneously embodies the hip-ness (relish) of Amr Diab (Egypt’s most revered pop-star), the persuasion power of evangelist Billy Graham, and unsubtle therapy of Dr Phil, American popular talk-show host” (Bayat 2002: 23). The popularity of these figures among youth across European societies can be one reason for several similarities among the second generation of Muslims within the European societies, despite the different European immigration policies and migration history.

<sup>20</sup> According to the leader of the *shura* changes in what is religiously acceptable and not (such as whether or not Hip Hop on religious meetings is suitable) may be understood in light of the organisers becoming more experienced, are becoming adults and thus less afraid of doing something ‘incorrect’.

The transnational aspects of migrants and Muslims in Europe have been increasingly analysed (see Amiraux 2003; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Césari 2004; Faist 1998; Østergaard-Nielsen 2002). The term is meant to capture the processes through which immigrants (re)produce social fields across geographical, cultural and political borders (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7). It emphasises the multiplicity of relationships, including familial, economic, social, organisational, political and religious, developed by migrants which transverse the country of residence (ibid), particularly promoted through new technological developments.

Transnational and global flows are part of shaping the youth's religious culture in terms of religious authorities, fashion and Islamic consumption. Religious ideas and concepts accessed online or through cable TV are further debated and (re)interpreted locally in MJD. The influences of the media on the process of forming an understanding of one's identity and life world (Hedberg 1979) are central for these youth in their search for an 'authentic' Muslim self. The young girls utilise Websites, online Muslim branded clothes, or German based religious, ethical products, such as T-shirts with "I love my prophet", and Arabic TV shows illustrating new ways of how to tie the headscarf.<sup>21</sup> Online video clips on religious themes by 'Baba Ali' at youtube are enjoyed by the youth in Berlin, situating them within a world encompassing religious youth culture.<sup>22</sup>

Another transnational praxis is donning the veil. Deciding to veil can be less painful and unproblematic in countries where the majority population is Muslims. Sometimes their relatives in Turkey, Syria or Egypt expect the girls to wear the headscarf at certain occasions. More importantly, the youth can "get used to it there" since they encounter few negative gazes or questions on "why they veil". Back in Germany many continue veiling, either because they are now "used to it" or feel "attached to it".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Popular online links are [www.MuslimGear.com](http://www.MuslimGear.com), [TheHijabShop.com](http://TheHijabShop.com); [TheNasheedShop.com](http://TheNasheedShop.com); [TheMuslimBabyShop.com](http://TheMuslimBabyShop.com); [TheHalalHealthShop.com](http://TheHalalHealthShop.com) at <http://www.dukkaan.net>.

<sup>22</sup> Since 2006 'Baba Ali' has appeared online with video-blogs. Dressed in cool T-shirts, interacting youthfully with the camera in a stand-up comedian style, this young, American-Iranian Muslim represents a new form of authority. At one MJD presentation to explain her point, Somaya referred to 'Ummah Films' on YouTube and the film cut 'the Haram police', suggesting that the other girls should "check out this funny - and even attractive - guy." The authority of the 33 year old Web designer Ali Ardekani, known as 'Baba Ali', arrives, I believe, from his eloquent ability to clearly communicate many of the contemporary problems and urgent issues that the youth experience in their everyday life, while playing on the generational gap and the relation to non-Muslim surroundings.

<sup>23</sup> A recent research by Gökariksel and Secor (2008) investigates the transnational aspects of veiling-fashion. They argue that: "Today, veiling and its regulation takes place within a transnational legal context that produces

## Conclusion

The process of pluralization and fragmentation of religious authority in the Islamic tradition (Eickelman and Piscatori 1992) is not advancing secularization. Rather it opens up for an expansion of religious education. Educated Muslims are consequently given or constructing spaces to participate in discussions on the Islamic tradition and how Islam is applicable with democracy, civil society and human rights (Casanova 2006: 29). Such spaces tended to be only filled by Muslim intellectuals or the traditional *ulama*. According to Casanova (2001), Islam follows here the confrontation of all world religions to react to modernity, partly by repositioning the traditions in an attempt to fashion their own version of modernity.

The ‘turn to Islam’ among the contemporary youth can be considered as an urban phenomenon, also taking place in cities like Cairo (Ismail 2006) and Istanbul (Sanktanber 2002). A city offers a variety of religious spaces representing different religious orientations and congregations providing particular ‘infrastructures of action’ (Ismail 2006: 12). Identifying with religion in the urban sphere is not simply a consequence of being alienated in the anonymous urbanity and the weakening of community structures when moving from the rural to the urban. The urban offers mobilizing opportunities for religious organizations to situate their message in the social antagonism and positions, a characteristics which have historically always been a part of the urban landscape (Ismail 2006: 112-113). In fact, the variety of religious spaces in the urban Berlin makes it possible for the youth to pursue a more individual and privatized orientation towards Islam, within a ‘faith community’ which combines the local, national and transnational in new agglomerates.

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“European” and “Muslim” spaces at both local and global scales. The production, sale, and consumption of veiling-fashion are part of the growing transnationalization of Muslim identity and political practice (Soysal 1994; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006; Samers 2003; Jackson et al. 2004; Nagel and Staeheli 2004; Silvey 2006; Staeheli and Nagel 2006)” (Gökariksel and Secor 2008: ).

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