

Islam as a New Urban Identity? Young Muslims in Berlin

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Abstract

Youths with migration background in European cities are increasingly turning to Islam in a quest for authenticity, an individual identity and as part of their group orientation. Although the urban context is normally considered as a space where religious communities fulfil few social roles, the last decade has seen a return of religion within the urban space. The paper argues that in the process of individualisation and dynamic social transformations, the youths are constructing a new religious youth culture in the urban space.

After shortly considering the differences within the young generation, the focus turns to the generational differences in their orientation to Islam, including how the youth make use of the German language, promoting a de-ethnicisation of Islam and pursuing a religious consumption. An understanding of why the women turn to Islam must combine a consideration of the othering processes and potential emancipation struggles at the same time as religiosity is taken seriously.

The references for the paper are from my participant observation with about 40 young female Muslims in Berlin as part of my PhD thesis in Social Anthropology. The youths (13 to 30 years old) have parents from Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, Germany, and Bosnian and most participate in a religious organisation.

Introduction

The landscape of European cities have since the 1960s been influenced by immigration from earlier colonies or through working contracts between European and non-European countries. The last decade, Islam has becoming increasingly present in European societies through the global (negative) media focus, increased use of the veil (*hijab*) among young Muslims, and by replacement of the earlier provisory backyard mosques of the 1970s with purpose-built mosques of the late 1990s (see Cesari 2005). Although the urban context is usually associated as a place where people turn away from religion and where religious communities fulfil few social roles, the last decade has seen a return of religion within the urban space. Today, youths from the second and third generation of migrants in European cities are increasingly turning to Islam in a quest for authenticity, an individual identity and as part of their group orientation.

This paper will discuss the ‘turn to Islam’ as a factor of identification among youths born in the European society with parents from a second country. First, I will discuss what kind of identification with Islam one finds among the young generation in Berlin and second ask why some youth are turning to Islam as a main point of reference. Throughout, the role of the urban space on what I consider as a new religious youth culture will be indicated. The data for the paper arrive from my participant observation with about 40 young female Muslims (13 to 30 years old) with parents from Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, Germany, and Bosnian.¹

¹ The participant observation (18 months) was conducted as part of my PhD thesis “‘SMS to Allah’

Islam as a new youth culture?

When talking about religious belonging among young females in Berlin the large intra-generational differences must first be noted. Whereas what one can call 'chic' Muslims combine headscarf, strong make-up and sexy clothes; others veil with a more modest dress comportment; and again others are not *visually* practising Islam, although talking with them some might try to lead a religious lifestyle, in the sense that they pray and fast. In addition, among the secular youths some also recognise a cultural affinity with Islam. I am here discussing young Sunni Muslims² for whom Islam is their main point of reference.

Turning to Islam as a focal orientation of identity involves not only a religious moral orientation, but a certain aesthetic among the youths. This includes a consciousness on how they dress in the public, an effort on behaving 'religiously correct' in terms of gender relation in the public sphere, and to not visit places with high alcohol consumption. Religious businesses or religious consumption are part of the youths' identification with Islam; in 'religious shops', particularly in Kreuzberg, Wedding and Neukölln, the youths can purchase CD readings of the Koran, candies without gelatine³, Mecca Cola, a counselling book for food purchase for Muslims in Germany, and hijab-Barbie (Barbie with a veil) while listening to religious songs by Yusuf Islam or Ammer 114⁴ - a German 'Islamic' hip-hop artist. Information on which of the 'Turkish' or 'Arabic' *Imbiss* are religiously 'correct' is passed via word-of-mouth.⁵ Islamic graffiti 'imprinting' on the Berliner urban landscape such as 'Muslims are the best. Live Allah!' or 'Muslims love best' (Kaschuba 2007)⁶ both challenge urban spaces and present spaces of belonging (Bendixsen 2007).

Typically, the youth deem their parents as not observing Islam 'correctly', but as performing a mixture of religious forms and traditions brought with them from the Turkish villages. The youths instead seek a 'pure' or 'true' Islam (Roy 2004), detached from culture, ethnicity and nation by going back to the sources, particularly the Koran and the Sunna (the exemplary practice of the Prophet Mohammed). Religion is practiced either alone, by use of the many online groups on the internet, or in religious study groups where focus is not only on the increase of religious knowledge, but on an understanding of the texts, a certain self-reflection, and critical argumentation.

The inter-generational differences are to a degree a consequence of the socio-economic changes as part of the migration process, and the fact that in the new migration space the

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² In Germany the largest part are the Sunni (approximately 2,2 millions), followed by the Schiit (approximately 400.000) and the Alevite (approximately 340.000) (von Below and Karakoyun 2007, p.33). These numbers do not reflect whether or not the individual actually identify with Islam or not and should be handled with care.

³ Many groceries contain the additive E441 (used in ice cream, chocolate, candies and different food products) is produced through swine skin and the E47-E474 contains of swine products. There is a difference in the degree to how careful one is concerning eating these products.

⁴ '114' refers to the number of *Sourates* (chapters) in the Koran.

⁵ Mandel has described how shopkeepers in Kreuzberg use the fear of *haram* (forbidden) meat and what is considered obligatory or *helal* (permitted) to their advantage. The result is an increase of shops that cater exclusively to Turks, creating a Muslim space in Germany, subdivided by Sunni or Alevi. She rightly points to that this commercial orientation is also creating a place for migrants, on their own terms (Mandel 1996).

⁶ My own translation from the German language. Original: *Muslime sind die Besten. Es lebe Allah* and *Muslime lieben am besten*. (Kaschuba 2007, p. 83).

former conceptions of social practices are questioned and tested.⁷ Having no intention to return to their parents' homeland, many youths consciously learn about Islam in the German language as they are more fluent in this language (see also Nökel 2002). Consequently, it becomes easier to explain Islam to non-Muslim Germans. The majority focus on how to best practice Islam, the religious behaviour and belief, *in Germany*, which is not only a non-Muslim society, but also considered as a secular society.

Clearly, how the youths identify with Islam is affected by their status as members of a post-migration religious minority (Cesari 2003). At the same time, the turn to Islam is an urban phenomenon, which can also be found in Cairo (Ismail 2006) and Istanbul (Sanktanber 2002). A city offers a variety of religious spaces representing different religious orientations and congregations. In fact, the variety of religious spaces in the urban Berlin makes it possible for the youth to pursue a more individual and privatised orientation towards Islam, developing a religious youth culture.

Mosques and religious organisations are places where they can perform their religious practices, pose questions, and meet people of the 'same kind', to exchange experiences or to be reminded of their religious duties. As one of the youth told me; "*Living in this society, there are distractions everywhere. It's more difficult to be motivated to keep all the obeisance and religious needs.*" Looking more closely at the reasons given by these women concerning why they participate where is instructive for understanding the urban experience of religious lifestyles in contemporary Berlin.⁸ Through my participant observation, I was able to gain an understanding of their mental mapping of mosques. Whereas some mosques are typically Bezirk (district)-mosques where members live close by, other mosques or organisations attract Muslims from all over Berlin.⁹ Muslim youths in Berlin make use of a kind of mental maps, not only to make sense of the different religious spaces, but also to find local spaces with which they can identify (Bendixsen 2007). In general, the females' decisions on where to participate are related to what is learned (the branches, which school of thoughts, whether it is strict or not), who is there (the ethnicity of the participants, mixed or whether your friends or family are there), and how it is done (i.e. how the gender division during the lecture is done matters for some). Through active engagement with the different available religious urban spaces the city becomes 'a negotiated reality' for these young religious women (cf. Anderson 1991).

⁷ Immigration always changes how religion is transmitted. Social alienation and frustration because of displacement impact ethnic and religious identification, but also connected with the very move is that religion and culture no longer are "prearranged identities" (Göle 2003, p. 813). By changing context, Islam no longer is transmitted automatically from one generation to another or considered as a norm taken for granted.

⁸ This should thus not be considered as representative of all Muslims living in Berlin. Among the elder women and males, there might be other perspectives and factors involved. Insofar that the people can change their feeling of belonging to one particular mosque or religious organisation, this mental mapping has to be understood as fluid, not static. Perceptions can change with age, marriage and also because the members of a mosque change. Furthermore, although I focused only on mosques and semi-public religious organisations, there are also private Koran reading groups in homes, while some individuals prefer to practice alone. I focus here on the part of the Muslim population that chooses to participate publicly in a mosque on a regular basis, either to learn about Islam and/or to partake in a religious community.

⁹ See in particular Spielhaus and Färber (eds.) 2005. Physical proximity remains relevant for which mosques the women visit regularly. Several of the women would not participate in a particular mosque even if they "really like the Imam" because "it's too far away" and so "it takes too long time to get there!" (Bendixsen 2007).

At the same time, the transnational element of the youth's orientation to Islam can neither be underestimated; figures like Tarid Ramadan,¹⁰ the Egyptian religious scholar al-Qaradawi¹¹ and the popular Egyptian television preacher Amr Khaled are references and authorities for youths all over the world wide Umma (Mandaville 2005). Through the online discussion groups and cable TV shows, ideas and concepts are spread and discussed between different local spaces. The recent popular Baba Ali figuring in 'Ummah films' on *youtube* is one example of a young, American-Iranian Muslim who creatively contribute to a transnational Muslim youth culture with his funny, satiric clips with names such as "Culture vs Islam", "Muslim while flying", "looking for a spouse online" and "the Parent Negotiations".¹²

Overall, the youths' emphasis on a 'pure' Islam has consequences; parents loose their role as authorities in Islam (cf. Jacobsen 2006, Roy 2004, Cesari 2004), and it de-ethnicises the youths' religious activities and identification. Turning to Islam is not making the youths feel more 'Turkish', but rather detach their ethnic identity from their religious identity. The 'Othering' processes from strangers on the street, politicians, teachers and the media, affect the difficulties many youths have in feeling as a 'German'. For practising Muslims the question of belonging can appear even more complex: is it possible to combine being German with being Muslim? In the public sphere this is often considered as an oxymoron. The clear distinction that the youth make between ethnicity and religion makes it possible to feel as not "betwixt and between" their parent's home country and Germany. Instead, as one of the women told me "religion can be a bridge", because it combines both; one can say „I am a Muslim“ and it does not matter whether one is German, Turkish or Arabic. When the young females look for a marriage partner, it is increasingly important whether their future husband is a religiously observant Muslim, disregarding his ethnic background. Nevertheless, the majority still marry within the ethnic group of their family – most likely due to language, social network and expectations from their parents.¹³

In this religious identity formation, several seek to improve themselves religiously by increasing their knowledge and enhancing their moral behaviour, for example to pray more or to wear the headscarf. Several researchers have by now pointed to that there are diverse reasons why young females decide to veil; some of the young women are forced by their parents, for others the headscarf is a fashion or a political statement, and some veil of

¹⁰ The work of Ramadan, best typified by "To Be a European Muslim" (Ramadan 1998) calls for a new pragmatism in Muslim thought and jurisprudence, particularly among Muslims living as minorities in the West. He encourages young Muslims to regard their position in non-Muslim homelands not as one of weakness, but rather as a source of strength (Mandaville 2005). His success is also a result of the well functioning Tawhid publishing network, distributing his audio- and videocassettes (Bowen 2005).

¹¹ Qaradawi produces a discourse which is modern and moderate at the same time as its more formal dimensions (using more traditional *fatwa* methodology) preserve the authenticity of Islamic traditionalism. Popular religious programs on al-Jazeera and translations of his books into several languages has promoted him as representing one of the most popular contemporary transnational Islamic discourses (Mandaville 2005) with devotees from the *banlieus* of Paris to the *pesantren* of Southern Asia (Mandaville 2005 and Hefner 2005).

¹² See <http://youtube.com/ummahfilms>. Since 2006 Baba Ali, figuring the 'Ummah films' has published several video clips of 4 to 8 minutes where he is self-ironic or critiquing the Muslim community world wide (for example "seasonal Muslims" who are only practicing during Ramadan and "That's not hijab" – about young females not wearing their headscarf 'correctly') or making satire of how the non-Muslim society relate to Islam (i.e. "Muslim while flying"). The very young, playful and funny clips are enjoyed by the youths in Berlin. One of the clips "Muslim Characters at work" even have German subtitles (others are translated to Bosnian, Arabic, Italian, Russian and French). Viewers of the various clips are from 2.000 up to 170,000 some of the clips have more than 2000 comments. He is currently in a competition on accessing the videos on television.

¹³ The last years have seen a slow increase in the German speaking religious activities and cooperation between the religious organisations across the ethnic, although most organisations are still organised ethnically.

religious conviction. In the latter case, veiling is part of a continuous personal effort to improve themselves as ‘pious subjects’ (Mahmood 2005), to please God and to reach Paradise in afterlife. Seeing other veiled women in the street becomes part of their feeling of belonging in Berlin; “*We are always so happy to see someone with a headscarf, particularly here [Reinickendorf] where there are not that many*” one of the females exclaimed during a pick nick. It improves their self-consciousness as Muslims and group identification with Islam in Berlin.

The representative role the youth sense as a consequence of ‘othering’ processes can not be underestimated.¹⁴ Many youths, females in particular, experiences being “walking representatives of Islam” in their daily life vis-à-vis both non-Muslims and the Muslim population. With this follows a feeling of obligation to improve the stained (Goffman 1957) image of Islam in the German public where they are depicted as suppressed or victims of patriarchal forces – thus at the same time, portraying ‘the Muslim man’ as a suppressor.¹⁵ Daily micro-politics are effort to improve the stigmatised representation of Muslims: i.e. awareness on how they behave in the street, being helpful, or enhance their Islamic knowledge to improve their answers. The self-awareness of representing Islam increases the social pressure, from themselves, other Muslims and non-Muslims on the young females: as the females try to promote an authentic or ideological image of Islam and Muslims it involves high demands on their daily behaviour in the street. The price for ‘being in a community’ (Bauman 2001, p.4) includes self-control and living up to constructed expectations.

Why is the young generation turning to Islam as a factor of identification?

‘Identity’ is not static or fixed, but continuously (re)created or formed in social interaction – identity is about ascription, both by individuals of themselves and of individuals by others (Jenkins 1994). Groups identify themselves and are categorized by others. During the youth years, identity formation and influence from peer groups or lifestyle groups are particularly strong, when many seek a ‘self’, deal with questions on “who to identify with” and a sense in life (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995).

Just like other youth subcultures which have developed in the urban spaces throughout the years (see Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995) the turn to Islam can be considered as a response to socio-economic conditions. It is one possible way to create a space and place within a life-world which does not offer many positive prospects for a socially and economically secure future. Identification with Islam can be seen as a possible solution towards discrimination (Cesari 2003), a way out for youths who are more or less excluded or feel rejected from the society and search for a sense in life (Khosrokhavar 1997). In some ways, the ‘Muslim’ youths are searching to publicly articulate an ‘authenticity’, often through symbols, that represent their religious identity as a way to claim *recognition* from the larger society (cf. Fraser 2000).¹⁶

¹⁴ The notion of the ‘Other’ is used in various disciplines ranging from philosophy, psychoanalysis and postmodernists theories in anthropology. In postcolonial theory, which is my point of entrance here, it refers to ‘the discursive production of another’ – a process typified by the way in which Europe produces an Orient-as-other, also described as ‘othering’ (Spivak 1985). There is a general tendency to consider ‘others’ as categorically and essentially different. In this idea of difference, are potentials for hierarchical and stereotypical thinking, which it is why the effect of othering bears resemblance to racism (Zizek 1990). The social process of *comparing* oneself to others which one at the same time considers as intrinsically different and simultaneously *distancing* oneself from them – a distance and difference confirming ones ‘normality’- can be called ‘othering’.

¹⁵ See Schiffer (2005) for a good analysis of the current framing of Islam in the media.

¹⁶ For a critique see also Jouili 2007.

Further, through 'othering' processes many youths gain more interest in Islam. The youths are expected to continuously answer questions somehow related to Islam from strangers on the street or from teachers who position the youths as 'experts' on Islam because of their Turkish or Arabic family background. After embarrassing situations where the youths are not able to answer questions many seek knowledge to be better prepared next time, or of curiosity. Thus, partly as a consequence of categorisation from outsiders the youth experience a need to improve their knowledge of Islam, and through this some of them continue to identify personally with what was originally a more distant part of their parents' 'culture'.

The turn to Islam can also be a way to directly or indirectly gain more emancipation from their families; by referring to religious argumentations the youths can easier legitimate certain aspirations by stating that particular practices, like forced marriage, are tradition and not Islamic. Veiling can give the girls more freedom in that their parents will trust their behaviour more in the public (cf. Jacobsen 2006, Salih 2004 and Nökel 2002).

At the same time, analysing Islam purely as an identity factor against external social structures becomes too functionalistic. During my fieldwork with the young females I realised that one need to take these youths religiousness seriously. I think of religiousness as a mode of subjectivity which educes a person to make certain acts and choices in order to be or become a 'good' Muslim. Decision to participate in a Muslim organisation or to identify with Islam is shaped by religious and spiritual desires and experiences.¹⁷ Several of the females starts to practice Islam more actively because they had a dream related to their - until then - lax religious praxis or because they are feeling confused and want to know more about Islam. 'Being a Muslim' is also about seeking to identify oneself as a religious person where motivation to becoming a 'pious' subject are vehicle for daily activities. This aspect of religiosity is often neglected, perhaps because in the secular oriented North European urban societies there is a normative perception that youth should not actively think of God or pursue religious morality and values, or at least one does not expect that youth should vigorously think of God.

Concluding remarks

Is the combination of youth, religion and an urban lifestyle a contradiction? Or is the urban space opening up for a variety of religious orientation in the 21st century, a period depicted as uncertain, ever changing and disintegrating communities? It is my perception that the modern process of individualization takes place (Bauman 2001) at the same time as there is a continued process of ascription, categorisation, and 'othering' processes; any individual outwardly resembling a Muslim are expected to represent Islam in any situation. The conditions of community formation are upheld (Baumann 2001), although the form of religious communities has changed. In this process, a new religious lifestyle among the young Muslims is developing in the urban spaces.

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¹⁷ As Rambo correctly intervenes: "[r]eligion and spirituality, like aesthetics, should be considered a domain of life and experience that has its own validity" (Rambo 1999, p.264). There are, he continues, "experiences, both cognitive and affective, that are distinctive to religion and spirituality" (ibid).

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