

# Happy at home & going international: Young Portuguese Muslims

**TEXT:** Nina Clara Tiesler

***While recent immigration from Muslim countries contributes to the diversification of Islamic life in Portugal, postcolonial people of Indian-Mozambican background continue playing a key role in Islamic association work. One example is the Youth Association of the Islamic Community (CilJovem) in Lisbon, which gets more engaged in Muslim activities at the international level since 9/11. A study which compares cultural attitudes of these young Portuguese Sunnites with those of non-Muslim peers reveals: Islam and Muslim-ness are important matters; they are deeply attached to their home country and 'mainstream Portuguese'.***

For around 30 years, Islamic communities have represented the largest non-Christian religious minority in Portugal. Muslims in Portugal constitute a diverse phenomenon, in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic integration, and concerning their religious affiliation in Islam. The contemporary Muslim presence has no socio-demographic linkage to the historical Islamic presence of Gharb Al-Andaluz but is largely the result of postcolonial movements of middle class Ismaeli and Sunni families of Indian/South Asian background who came from Mozambique in the early/mid 1970s, and of Fulas and Mandingas (at first, mainly male workers) from Guinea Bissau who have arrived slightly later. In the 1980s, the number of Muslims of Indian descent was exceeded by Sunni Muslims hailing from Guinea Bissau.

Immigration to Portugal has taken place over decades, perhaps even centuries, with some exceptions closely linked to the country's role as a (former) colonial empire. Immigration patterns in Portugal changed in the beginning 1990s. The rather small country at the Western European margin (population ca. 10 Million) had become a 'promising destination' for migrants who aim to escape economic poverty through joining one of the wealthy countries of the European Union. This means that more 'new' immigrants without any colonial linkage to Portugal (and hence not Portuguese-speaking and facing more obstacles in gaining a permanent status of residence) than ever before arrived and/or had been registered in Portugal, partly in the course of several legalisation campaigns realised by the Portuguese government from 1991/1992 onwards.

### **Muslims in Portugal: Islamic associations and 'the parents'**

While immigration from Portuguese speaking African countries and Brazil continues, most of the 'new' immigrants hail from Eastern European countries, and, numerically less important, from Morocco, Senegal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Most of the latter (and temporarily: Bosnian refugees) have joined the still overwhelmingly lusophone (Portuguese speaking) Islamic communities which mainly concentrate in and around Lisbon, while the total Muslim presence is estimated by researchers and the communities themselves as counting some 38.000-50.000 people.<sup>1</sup> At least 60% are Portuguese citizens, which holds true for a smaller percentage among Muslims from Guinea Bissau, and mainly for people of South Asian origin who came from Mozambique. The vast majority of young Muslims who are subject of our study are children of the latter, who had actually been the first active members of Islamic communities in contemporary Portugal.

The presence and engagement of the small group of Sunni Muslims from Mozambique (which had been under Portuguese rule until 1975), who were studying at the faculties of law, medicine and economics in the metropolis before decolonisation, had been decisive in the processes of establishment and recognition of Islamic communities in Portugal. Most of these community founders as well as other South Asians had been Portuguese citizens already under colonial rule. Consequently, they did not perceive themselves as 'immigrants' and many among them perceived Portugal as 'the country which received us'. Muslim families of Indian/South

Asian origin, mainly of middle class background, who had to leave Mozambique in the course of post-independence Africanisation policies and due to civil war, coped rather well with integrating into the labour market or re-establishing their small and larger business in Portugal. According to our ethnographic experiences, the percentage of (proto-)middle class people is slightly lower among Moroccans and Bangladeshis and significantly lower among Muslims who came from African countries.

Although many African Muslims gather around and are closer linked to their Sufi leaders, and Muslims from Bangladesh have recently founded a prayer hall close to their work place, the vast majority of at least ca. 30,000 Sunnites and their local communities are linked to and take occasionally part in the life of the central Islamic Community of Lisbon (CIL). While the question of 'representativity' continues a controversial issue between state and Muslim organisations (and among the latter) in some other European countries, the CIL, founded in 1968 by university students from Mozambique, certainly acts as an umbrella organisation in formal and informal ways for Sunni Muslims. Alongside common religious, cultural and social infrastructures<sup>2</sup> (including a book store, chatrooms or the community website), three associations were founded under the rooftop of the thirty-five years old Central Mosque in the heart of Lisbon, belonging to CIL (the umbrella organisation reaches beyond the Central mosque): the Women's Association, one of Guinean Muslims and the Youth Association of the Islamic Community (CiJovem) which is organised and frequented mainly (if not only) by those young people of South Asian origin who's parents came from Mozambique.

### The Study and Group

Working with a particular group of young Muslims in a framework of a broader research project on transnational circuits and concepts of home and belonging among Muslims in Portugal, we have realised a study which allows a comparison of cultural attitudes, mobility and future aspirations of young Portuguese Sunnites with a larger group of young Portuguese non-Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

These young Muslims participate regularly in activities organised by the CiJovem, like dinners, 'passeios' (dislocations in other cities or regions of Portugal), Bowling, five-a-side football matches, or the annual Rally through Lisbon on the occasion of the beginning of Ramadan. At least 4-6 events of this nature are organised per year, frequented by around 60-150 young people. Some of them meet more frequently in a discussion forum in the Central mosque. The organizers describe the CiJovem as a non-profit religious, educational and cultural association dedicated to organize activities to promote interaction inside the Islamic Community and at the same time to build bridges between the Portuguese public and Portuguese Muslims. Apart from their fulltime jobs, several members of its leading committee are further engaged in volunteer work, for example as members of the Zakat Association, working directly with people born in Lisbon, and/or doing some other works with the Oncology Hospital and with the 'Banco Alimentar' (Association to fight hunger).

***Dr. phil. Nina Clara Tiesler is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-UL). She is member of the bibliographical network EURISLAM and co-ordinates the international research network MEL-net (Muslims in Lusophone Spaces), hosted at ICS-UL. Email: [ninaclara.tiesler@ics.ul.pt](mailto:ninaclara.tiesler@ics.ul.pt)***



All young Portuguese people, Muslims and non-Muslims, included in the quantitative survey are lusophone (Portuguese-speaking), urban people of middle class background, and are living in Lisbon, where most of them were born. With single exceptions, they are all Portuguese citizens, mostly between 16 and 26 years old, making their transition to adulthood. The quantitative survey conducted in Lisbon with a total of 241 young people focused upon examining key issues in their lives, including work, study and leisure. Among the two groups of young people who were surveyed, 200 young people taken from a variety of tertiary education institutions and a further 41 young Muslims (of a total of ca. 150 who are related to the Youth Association). A majority were found to be still living in the parental home (68% of non-Muslims and 80% of the young Muslims), and both sets of young people agreed that it was 'good to live with their parents,' the young Muslims somewhat more so (Muslims: 86%, non-Muslims: 68%).

What is revealed is, generally, that across the board, despite what are perceived to be difficult structural circumstances in Portugal, particularly in relation to the labour market, these young people are content with their lives. All of them expressed quite critical views on the educational system, salaries or the employment options in Portugal. Nevertheless, in respect to what these results actually tell us, on fatalism, internal locus of control and motivation, we can deduce that many of these young people believe strongly that they have the power to shape their own futures, i.e. they will be successful in life through their own efforts rather than leaving things to chance. Regarding self-esteem, these young people are generally happy being the people they are. This holds true particularly for the young Muslims, who showed very strong family ties and peer-relationships (just as the other young Portuguese young people) and community-relations, while 67% of them said that they feel 'more individual than part of any kind of collective' (Muslim males 81%, females 47%; non-Muslims 67%, males 78%, females 69%).

### Broader horizons but less mobile

In relation to the future, the overwhelming majority of both samples also plan to spend the rest of their lives in Portugal, rather than pursue trans-national future life trajectories. While the overall picture is one of little difference between the young Muslims and non-Muslims, it has been possible to observe some interesting differences, for instance, that the young Muslims are somewhat more globally-orientated: in terms of language skills, travel horizons and (virtual) communication, including political engagement for Muslim matters: Representatives of the CiJoven take part in the activities of ASMA, for instance in the MLT programme ('Muslims Leaders of Tomorrow').

On the other hand, they are even less predisposed than other young Portuguese people to leave Portugal for longer periods, let it be for educational purposes, for a good employment or by getting engaged into a relationship. This is interesting for two reasons: Firstly, these ambitious and work-and study-committed young people are aware about many options regarding career-wise future life plans look more promising outside Portugal - and that geographical mobility would improve their opportunities. And secondly, migration trajectories and relationships to other South Asian and Portuguese Muslims (partly family relatives) in the UK (which they consider more 'emancipated in Muslim matters') are kind of established. Furthermore, ethnic and racial discrimination belong to daily life experience, and the specific historical context of the 'War on Terror', in which this study took place, leads to a societal atmosphere wherein islamophobic voices gain space while the space for Muslim voices is decreasing - also in Portugal, where less empirical evidence for anti-Muslimness or tension between majorities and the Muslim minority than in other European countries came to the surface of public light before 9/11. They, whose parent's biographies are marked by migration, are not ready to leave their home country with an overwhelming majority always wanting to live in Portugal (81%, compared to 68% in the non-Muslim sample), where 44% of them attend religious services on a weekly basis (65% males, 19% females) and around 55% (we had to substrate the under-18s) always vote in elections - in comparison to 61% young non-Muslims.

### Young Muslims in the context of Youth Studies

Apart from their stronger religious dedication<sup>4</sup> and broader international horizons, especially in terms of travel - only 45% of them prefer to spend holidays in Portugal, while 78% of the non-Muslims do so; and the young Muslims travel regularly out of Europe, mainly to Mozambique and Middle Eastern countries, including 12% who already went to Mecca – we have found such little difference concerning cultural attitudes among these young middle class people that it has sometimes been difficult to distinguish the findings of both samples. This includes, for instance, that 78% of both groups 'prefer beach holidays' as their leisure time options, which is indeed 'very Portuguese'.

In a general discursive context where religious belonging and cultural attitudes often miss differentiation, and where a strong dedication to Islam is often erratically suggested as being opposed/apart/alien to the dominant culture or to active Western citizenship, we have consciously chosen this group of religiously dedicated and socio-political active Sunnites for our comparative study: young people who consider Islam and Muslim-ness important matters in their daily life.

As with other national and regional contexts, studying (Muslim) youth in Portugal presents particular challenges in respect to what to study and indeed whom to study; as Linda Herrera has argued in the editorial of ISIM Review 16, Youth (in general) has long been treated as a social problem:

'Much of the scholarly and media attention to youth, particularly from the 'global North,' has focussed on issues such as juvenile delinquency, unemployment, drug abuse, and high-risk sexual behaviour. The situation, however, has been changing. Notwithstanding the persistence of – and continued attention to – the older problems, newer areas also underline the youth as agents of change, creators and consumers of new technologies, trend-setters in the arts, music fashion, and innovators of new forms of political organisations and social movements towards greater social and economic justice' (Herrera 2005: 4).

In other words, when studying young people, we need to focus on the everyday life experiences of the mainstream rather than the exceptional experiences at the fringes if we are to advance our understanding of contemporary youth and avoid misrepresenting or even demonising our subject of discussion. Furthermore Herrera comments that in relation to representations of Muslim youth, the emphasis tends to be upon issues of security, religious extremism and violence, thus 'reinforcing a single-minded approach to youth' (ibid). This research aimed to counterpoint such reinforcements by applying the same perspectives to Young Muslims as those made in scholarly works in the area of Youth Studies to 'mainstream' youth, to which Muslims in Portugal (and elsewhere) surely belong.

Therefore, in this step of research the young Muslims surveyed have not been addressed as 'young Muslims,' but rather as young people irrespective of their religious background.

Muslims and their cultural attitudes, eventual socio-political engagement and social mobility, are hardly ever discussed in a normative context, i.e. compared in relation to similarities rather than contrasts with non-Muslim minority and majority groups of same age, gender, class, migratory and/or educational backgrounds. In terms of analysis, this deficiency often leads to a disproportionate 'Islamicization' of the 'subject of study' (Muslims), and strengthening of the Islamicization of public (and academic) discourses (Tiesler 2006): in short, nearly everything and anything these Muslims do, think, affirm or negate appears as deriving from their Muslim-ness, i.e. as an Islamic particularity, which may in fact not be the case at all. Economic and social aspects, class, gender and educational background, the impact of particular experiences in a specific historic context (e.g. social mobility or social exclusion in a European society) as well as similarities and continuities with non-Muslims or people of similar migratory experience are therefore often overlooked.

And still, accordingly to our ethnographic experience, it is indeed important to note that these young Muslims use their 'Muslim-ness' as a 'social capital' type resource in making the transition to adulthood. But to see such capital as an essentialist property is problematic, since, at least in the case of Portugal, there are these other influences to consider, most notably, what could conceivably be termed their 'Portuguese-ness'. This should not come as any surprise to anyone familiar with our research field, since, for instance, young Muslims are socialising with young non-Muslims in everyday life contexts unrelated to Islamic community life: in school, university, professional life, leisure time or socio-political engagement; and neither do their self-perceptions and senses of belonging refer exclusively to ethnic or religious bonds.

### Going International

Despite the little difference across the board of our survey which consciously excluded Islam-related issues, differences in daily life experience of young Muslims and non-Muslims can hardly be overlooked in Western societies, especially in times of 'Global War on Terror' - a war, as had already been highlighted elsewhere, 'which some of us are less allowed to forget than others'<sup>5</sup>. Among the immediate consequences for Muslim citizens and residents at the level of everyday life is the experience of being subject of a general public suspicion or verbally attacked - but, in our case, also a harsh alienation of their self-perceptions of being Muslim and Portuguese (which most of them are) due to the logic of public discourses where Islam is in general seen as the foreign, 'the Other', the threat, etc, and where the War on Terror delivers a political jargon where the absence of distinctions between 'Islam and Terror' no longer needs justification.

After having been nearly overlooked during the last decades, Muslims in Portugal became subjects of a new curiosity and 'subjects of studies' of the local academia but the framework for their comments and contributions is more than ever limited by others and determined by the War on Terror. Although national particularities and historicisation have an impact, these experiences, including the felt necessity to inform the public about what 'Islam means for Muslims' and creating self-determined spaces for Muslim voices are rather of international nature and indeed common among Muslims in Western countries. Part and parcel of the global 'Awakening of Muslim Subjectivity'<sup>6</sup> is certainly that more young Muslims are becoming engaged in Muslim discourses and activities at the local and global level.

Young Portuguese Muslims do not make an exception here. Besides the fact that this group of young Portuguese Muslims had been religiously dedicated and, concerning the elder ones among them, engaged in Islamic association work (the CilJoven was founded in 1992) already long before 9/11, it is especially during the last years that they are improving their international networking. As mentioned above, they now participate in International networks such as ASMA and the MLT programme which aim providing platforms for intra-faith conversation among young Muslims on major issues, such as integration, identity struggles, Islamic reactions to secularism, gender equality, among other pain points that breed alienation and extremism. The philosophy that informs their approach is that Muslims are part of the solution, and not the problem.

Referring to an example from the UK, the Portuguese Muslim youth association CilJoven has recently discussed the inauguration of an online platform where Islamophobic attacks can be listed and made public. They might not have many objective reasons to be 'happy at home' in current times, but they do feel 'at home' in their country: 89% of them agreed strongly with this position. 88% of the young non-Muslims did so as well. ☺

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<sup>1</sup>For different Islamic groups and organisations (more than named here in detail) see Vakil 2004 and Tiesler 2010. A general introduction on Muslims in contemporary Portugal is by Tiesler 2009, the particular case of Muslims from Bangladesh is approached by Mapril 2005 and 2009, aspects regarding the Ismaeli community by Keshnavjee 2000, and Moroccan immigrants by Gomes Faria 2007. Abranches (2007) realised a study on Muslim women and girls, and von Kemnitz (2002) on the perception of Islam and Muslims in the Portuguese press. The colonial history and its impact until the present day had been analysed by Vakil (2003). More extensive articles on this subject and particular study is by Tiesler and Cairns 2007 and 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Regarding Islamic infrastructures, there are two more 'representative' mosques near Lisbon besides the Central Mosque (1985), and another in Coimbra; a recognised, private primary and secondary Islamic School (with some non-Muslim pupils) in Palmela (near Lisbon); some further twenty cultural centres and prayer halls from North to South (but mainly near Lisbon), around twelve madrassas, at least six halal butcher shops and nine halal restaurants, three edited journals/newspapers (apart from grey literature). Among other religious groups, Muslims also make part in a TV-broadcasting programme (public channel), where the presentation time is divided according to the numerical strength of the communities (in practise, mostly occupied by the Catholic Roman Church and by Protestant and Pentecostal churches, coming second).

<sup>3</sup>The comparative quantitative survey was realised between November 2005 (young non-Muslims) and March 2006 (young Muslims) as a joint action of two different projects: the author's one analyses family histories of three generations of South Asian Muslims with triple migration experience under the title 'Muslims in Portugal: Religion, Collective Subjectivity and Shifting Perceptions of Home and Belonging', while Dr. David Cairns, to whom I am deeply grateful, focuses on attitudes towards mobility among diverse young people in Lisbon in his project 'Culture, Youth and Future Life Orientations'. The questionnaire was originally his design and it is due to his skills and experience that this joint study resulted in a rich pool of quantitative data and analyses. Both projects are funded by post-doctoral research fellowships provided by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) in Lisbon, and are hosted at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa (ICS-UL).

<sup>4</sup>Regarding methods and the issue of religious dedication, one clearly has to bear in mind that we have not compared this group of Muslims - which takes part and manages an Islamic Youth association - with another group of young people who are organised in a religious community. Among our non-Muslim sample, only 9% attend religious services on a weekly basis. And still, according to other studies on Portuguese youth and our ethnographic experience with other groups of young Muslims in Portugal and 'outside typical Muslim spaces', the latter (for instance Sunni Muslims from Guinea Bissau or Ismaelis who also came from Mozambique) generally give more importance to religion than their non-Muslim peers.

<sup>5</sup>At the conference on Islamic Social Movements which was held at ISCTE in Lisbon, Portugal, 5-6th of June 2006, it had been AbdoolKarim Vakil (King's College London) who quoted Felix Moos' subtle words: 'Hello? We are at war? Indeed, there is a war on; one which some of us are less allowed to forget than others', and who left no doubt about the fact that anthropological research on Muslims is framed by this context.

<sup>6</sup>Vakil and Sayyid 2006.