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“THE BLOOD OF A MUSLIM IS WORTHLESS, AFTER ALL”
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The article analyzes the impact of the supra-sociological and geo-strategic dimensions of historical relations between various components of the world system upon identity. We consider personal identities as well as shared ones, attempting to highlight the defensive, compensatory and subversive functions underlying processes of subjective identity construction as a response to the traumatic structure of the world system which results from history. Our hypotheses are based on fieldwork carried out immediately following the events of 7th July 2005 among British and Portuguese Muslims of Gujarati origin settled in Leicester, United Kingdom.

«Le sang du musulman, finalement, ne vaut rien.»
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Cet article analyse l’impact de la dimension suprasociologique et géostratégique des relations historiques entre les différentes composantes compétitives du système-monde tant sur les identités personnelles que sur les identités partagées, groupales ou communautaires, en cherchant à mettre en évidence la fonction défensive, compensatoire et subversive, des processus de subjectivation identitaire face à la structuration, traumatisante, du système-monde historiquement construit. Les hypothèses développées sont fondées sur un travail de terrain réalisé immédiatement après les événements du 7 juillet 2005 auprès d’interlocuteurs musulmans gujeratis, portugais et britanniques, résidents à Leicester (Royaume-Uni).

«O sangue de muçulmano, afinal, não vale nada.»
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Este artigo analisa o impacto da dimensão supra-sociológica e geo-estratégica das relações históricas entre os diferentes componentes competitivos do sistema-mundo sobre as identidades pessoais, bem como sobre as identidades partilhadas como grupais ou comunitárias, procurando evidenciar a função defensiva, compensatória e subversiva dos processos de subjectivação identitária face à estruturação, traumatisante, do sistema-mundo historicamente construído. Os argumentos desenvolvidos baseiam-se em trabalho de terreno realizado imediatamente após os acontecimentos do 7 de Julho de 2005 junto de interlocutores muçulmanos de origem Gujarati, portugueses e britânicos, residentes em Leicester (Reino Unido).

Supported by a case study in identity relations, the present article analyses the impact of the supra-sociological and geo-strategic dimension of historical relations

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between the different competitive components of the world system (Wallerstein 1974) upon the political dimension of personal identities. Moreover, it also considers shared identities, attempting to highlight the defensive, compensatory and subversive functions underlying processes of subjective identity construction as a response to the traumatic structure of the world system which emerges from history. These arguments will be constructed on the basis of fieldwork carried out shortly after the events of 7th July 2005 among British and Portuguese Muslims of Gujarat origin settled in Leicester, UK.

Our ongoing multi-sited ethnographic research project with interlocutors of Gujarat origin (Hindus and Muslims) alerted us to the fact that Leicester has had, at least since the 1970s, a strong force of attraction for families from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and especially Malawi. The 1991 UK Census also recorded that Leicester was the city in the UK with the fifth largest non-European population (28.5%), and the one with the second highest percentage of Indian-origin population (63,994 people, 23.7% of the total population); 58,875 of these had been born outside the EU, and their presence was mostly the result of the independence processes of African territories under British colonial administration.

The families of Gujarat origin arrived in large waves that caused serious concerns within the local Council, and concentrated in wards such as Spinney Hills, where the percentage of non-white population in the early 1990s reached 82.6% (of which more than 70% of Asian origins). A strategy of spatial concentration, whereby identity rivalries based on religion were central, led to the concentration of Gujarat-origin Muslims in Spinney Hills, while Gujarati Hindus mostly reside in Belgrave ward, a few miles away. In a context of de-Christianisation and alteration of customs in the younger generations of local residents, Muslims experienced the most marked growth, from 12,322 in 1983 (4.3%), to 30,885 in 2001, while Hindus and Sikhs had experienced hardly any alteration.

In parallel, Muslims of Gujarati origin in Leicester still were the “hosts” (in “their” neighbourhoods, associations, and in the dozens of mosques they have been building) of 3,000 to 4,000 Muslims of Portuguese origin, most of whom had been born in Mozambique, some of whom had also lived in post-colonial Portugal.

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1 We have chosen to use aliases for our interviewees. This is not any way an attempt to deny their voices (they themselves did not require anonymity); rather, an attempt to guarantee that these voices may continue to contradict local and national “knowledge”, “values” and “practices” without any fear of repercussion. We held a total of 39 in-depth interviews. The Muslim associations, which are common in Leicester, emerged as a strategic passage for the first encounters with East African Muslims. On the other hand, the multi-sited fieldwork we have been developing with Portuguese-speaking Muslims (in Mozambique and Portugal) enabled us to follow friends and relatives of some of our previous informants (whose socio-economic statuses vary widely). Interviews with both groups were initially oriented toward recording memories regarding their migratory histories (in Africa and Europe), and to the development of their identity strategies (economic, matrimonial, religious, etc.) through the generations.

2 Christians had decreased from 66.1% in 1983 to 44.7% in 2001; a significant number of churches had been converted into radio stations, wedding halls, or Hindu temples.

3 There is no statistical source on Portuguese-speaking Muslims in the UK. However, our interviews allow us to estimate that the first migratory flow of Luso-Mozambican Muslims to
Despite their shared genealogical references, experiences and memories of migration to the colonies, protectorates or other African territories under the colonial administration of either the Portuguese or the British; and despite the fact that they maintained and continue to establish material, symbolic and other connections and family ties, these two groups consider themselves to be profoundly different.

“Our colonisers were better than yours …”

The identity debates between them still mobilise their distinct colonial pasts, and their ambivalent identification with their respective colonisers (the Portuguese in Mozambique and the British in the territories of East Africa) as the main reason underlying their understanding of their experienced history, and the identity differences which they reciprocally attribute to one another.

“Kenya was the most developed territory from the economic point of view, because it was a British colony and there was much European investment. It was the territory with the best climate and quality of life, infrastructures, schools, universities, hospitals. So Kenyan Indians were usually the most affluent, the most educated, those who had a more European, more British lifestyle. Then I would say came the Indians of Uganda, and then those of Tanzania, and only after that those of Malawi and Mozambique. Another reason the Indians of Mozambique were less affluent was that Portuguese authorities did not develop Mozambican economy so extensively. Of course there existed a number of great exporters and importers, and a large number of small shopkeepers. There was no great investment in education as happened in East Africa.

As soon as the sons reached 10 or 12 years of age, they began helping out their fathers and uncles. They did not consider education to be important. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, there were more Indian professionals, politicians, journalists, an intellectual elite. […] So, when Indians from East Africa arrived to England, thirty years ago, already they were more distinguished than those who came from Kutch, Khatiavar and Surat. They frequently came from the same village or town, and in many cases, were related by family or caste.
Portuguese Muslims oppose the obsessive attention paid to the criteria of socio-economic and educational progress in the construction of the distinctions (i.e., of relative identity “superiority”) which underlie the colonial and post-colonial hierarchisation produced by their British peers. They too mobilise (more or less shared) reconstructions upon Portuguese and British colonial history. They favour a system of values (regarded as “Portuguese”) which promotes familiarising interaction and the affective personalisation of inter-ethnic relations – over another (regarded as “British”) which values the flaunting of the hierarchies of the world system and racial and civilisational segregation. They thus relativise the subtle accusation formulated by their peers and strengthen their “Portuguese” identification, which is taken as an ideal.

“If I could go back, I would still choose Mozambique. The friendship of the Portuguese was very different from that of the British. The British were pure rulers. In Mozambique, many Portuguese and Indians had personal relationships. For example, me and the godfather of my son, judge Santos Carvalho. […]. Friendships such as ours were not possible in Uganda, Kenya, and much less so in Rhodesia and South Africa. And I know full well what apartheid was. I was a cricket player, the only coloured player for the Mozambican national team. When we went to play to Rhodesia, I travelled in a separate wagon, I did not stay at a hotel, but in an Indian home, and even within the sports pavilion, I could not sit on the bench along with the other players. And these differences are still noticeable today. The British in general are more reserved, more rigid. You always have to be thinking in the words you are going to use, even amongst Muslims. The Portuguese however are more sociable, more transparent and they like to joke around. Look, there’s a word to sum it all up. The Portuguese, be they Catholic, Muslims, or Hindus, are more familiar.” (Jamal, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 1992, retired shopkeeper)

“They say that they were connected to a great power, while Portugal was a backward, peripheral country. They say that they were very satisfied with British rule in East Africa. But that British rule is still reflected nowadays in their way of life. Spinney Hills, Highfields, Evington, Belgrave, they’re all ghettos. The Indians segregate themselves. There are areas in Leicester where you don’t need to speak English. You just have to speak an Indian language. Sometimes, I tell them that most Indians in Portugal speak Portuguese, and that many have Portuguese friends. And they are surprised. […] But this comes from Mozambique. The Portuguese were not as racist as the South Africans or the Rhodesians. The Indians did not live in segregation. There was a lot of personal interaction between Indians and Portuguese. […] In the region of Beira, however, it was worse, there was more British influence. That area was dominated by Sena Sugar Estates, Lda, which had the Companhia Comercial de Moçambique as a branch. So much so that, when we speak of racism in Mozambique, we need to say it all: there was a time, in Beira, when even the Portuguese were segregated by the British.” (Amad, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 2002, retired accountant)

Moreover the two systems of values – associated to a lasting contact with the “way of being” of the Portuguese colonisers in Mozambique or the “way of being” of the British colonisers in the territories of East Africa – serve as an explanation of the main “difference” they themselves detect in each other: “differences” in the
degree of inter-racial, ethnic and religious openness, in the ways in which public space is appropriated, in the type of social and cultural “integration”, in their strategies of openness or isolation in inter-ethnic relations, and in the ways in which they live and communicate their religious “difference” in non-Muslim migratory contexts.

“In Leicester, Muslims prefer to live in areas where other Muslims live. In Portugal Muslims, at least those who came from Mozambique, do not attempt to live all clustered in the same area. They like living near non-Muslims, they have normal contacts with their neighbours, they are friends with many people of other religions. Many have shops, as you know, they have to deal with clients, they do so on a more personal basis, they know their clients by name […] and it is not just a question of business. I am not saying that there aren’t exceptions, but the British are more individualist, detached, unlike the Portuguese, both Muslim and non-Muslim. In Mozambique it was already so. I believe that this coexistence of ours makes very well integrated people of us, both economically and culturally. The only thing that sets us apart is our religion. But this doesn’t mean that we have to keep separate and neither do we have to constantly be restating that we are Muslims, the way they do.” (Fauzia, born in Portugal, visiting family in Leicester, student)

“Portuguese Muslims such as I, when they arrive in Britain, they find it a little apartheid, the blacks on one side, Indians on another, for example, the Chinese on yet another, the Greek on another […] a bit of segregation. But I also understand that someone made in India or even in Pakistan, right, when they come to a new place, they tend to prefer to live in that sort of place. We Portuguese Muslims are not like that, we really need to have people around, people of all styles and all religions, because we are used to that. Precisely because we all came from Mozambique, and in Mozambique it was so, and in Portugal it is so. […] I liked spending my holiday there. But to live, I wouldn’t like it.” (Soraia, born in Portugal, on holiday in Leicester, student)

This same narrative context also produced a number of the most pejorative opinions expressed by the Portuguese Muslims about their British peers and their (colonial and post-colonial) reference for identification and/or insertion. As well as pointing out the colonial “imperfections” of the English, namely the strength of their “racism” and their “cunning” in dividing and ruling, they explain most of the “hidden racism” and the (apparent) public tolerance towards difference, matched by a posture of self-isolation (religious, sectarian, within the caste, etc.) of which they accuse Muslims of East African origin as a result of a prolonged and ambivalent relationship with their British colonisers.

“Muslims of Indian origin also have to shoulder the weight of their colonial history with the British. First in India, then in East Africa. This is noticeable even today […] in the way they relate to the Europeans, in their hidden racism against Africans, in how they live their religion and relate to other religions. They segregate themselves, isolate themselves, they have difficulty in joining inter-faith activities, and pay great attention to their caste, they will only marry within their caste. They love clubs, where all members are men, all from the same caste, and all from Malawi, Kenya, or Uganda.” (Gulamo, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 1998, retired businessman)
“Here, mosques are easily come to resemble political parties, and many clerics contribute to that. You, us, you, us ... And in that, the British are very cunning, in dividing to rule. A British man, when he speaks to someone, will never tell them their opinion, he'd rather say, ‘you are right’. He speaks to someone who tells him the exact opposite, and still he says, ‘you are right’. And when he has the chance, he sets one up against the other. It happened in India, it happened in East Africa.” (Jamal)

You ought to be like us: culturally hybrid and “cosmopolitan”

The narratives of both groups of interviewees also emphasise “profound cultural differences”, associated with colonial and post-colonial inter-subjectivities. The most frequent perception is that Portuguese Muslims deploy a strategy of double differentiation, both from the dominant pattern of the culture of their ancestors, as reshaped by the dominant colonial influence of Mozambique, and from patterns of current British public culture, as reshaped by their British peers.

“The first great difference is cultural. The Portuguese Muslims speak Portuguese to each other, they speak a European language, while here most people speak Indian languages: Gujarati, Punjabi, Hindi. They can speak Gujarati too, but they prefer Portuguese. Another cultural difference, maybe this is something very personal, or maybe not, has to do with their behaviour, with the way they relate to people. I’ll give you an example. One of my neighbours in Highfields comes from Portugal. If he meets someone he knows on the street, whether the other person is Portuguese or not, he greets them very warmly, he may even cry out to them to attract their attention, if he sees them on the other side of the street, he will slap them on the back, he may spend ten minutes talking about his own life or asking about the other person’s. I don’t feel 100% British, but I have lived for more than thirty years in the U.K., and this is shocking to me. But I think this has to do with the Portuguese culture, doesn’t it ...” (Ebrahim, born in Malawi, has been living in Leicester since 1970, Islamic cleric)

“In Mozambique things were already like that. I too come from Malawi, but a large part of my family lived in Mozambique, in the region of Beira, and I spent my holidays there every year. The Portuguese always were more sociable than the British. And the Mozambican Muslims picked that up from the Portuguese. As soon as they meet someone, they treat them like they’re family. And that way they have of always joking around, that’s very Portuguese.” (Ismael, born in Malawi, has been living in Leicester since 1974, computer scientist)

Some of these practices of family-like relations are described as inappropriate or divergent from the “British” patterns of behaviour in public; however, others are classified as indexes – ambivalently admired, or criticised – of “Westernisation”. In particular, the latter is true for those who touch upon areas of identity-related social presentation, such as clothing, food, male-female relations, patterns of marriage or the degree of inter-ethnic openness. The Portuguese Muslims, while recognising the ambivalent or even derogatory tone used by certain of their peers when they refer to them as “baglás” [lit. as “white”], actually recognise themselves in most of the identity traits projected upon them and emphasise that these were established in Mozambique during the colonial period.
"They sometimes call us baglás: ‘you are like baglás’, ‘you speak like baglás’, ‘you live like baglás’, that is, they think we are too European. Because we speak a non-Indian language, but a European one, Portuguese, because we speak a lot of Portuguese, even at home. Take my sisters for example. They studied in Britain, speak Gujarati, and are married to non-Mozambicans, and still when they speak to their children they use those sentences, ‘Vamos lá fazer chichi’ [‘Let’s go peeh-peeh’], or ‘É preciso lavar o rabinho’ [‘Time to wipe your tushy now’] [...]. Baglás, because we like Portuguese food: cod, prawns, chicken with chilli, because not many days go by without having some strong black coffee, and we go to Portuguese restaurants. Baglás, because we follow Portuguese football. Baglás, because we do not dress the Muslim way. Baglás, because even in Mozambique, we were very accustomed to living with Europeans.” (Firoza, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 1978, business manager)

Even more interesting however is their own definition of their unique identity, which according to them is not merely the result – as some of their British peers suggest – of a prolonged mimicry (Taussig 1993, Bhabha 1994) in their relation with Portuguese colonisers. Much to the contrary, Portuguese Muslims are said to be “a case of their own”, a unique “mixture”, combining as no other diasporic group the best elements found in the traditions of their forefathers with all the best elements derived from a centuries-long contact with the Portuguese “colonisers”. They therefore brought together both ancestral and colonial repertoires, to which multiple African references were added.

“Indian Muslims from Mozambique are a unique instance. You will not find any other Indians in East Africa like them. Their community was the most mixed, that which integrated the highest number of coloured and mixed-race people. And from the cultural point of view too, you will not find any other community which combined so many references, Indian, African, Portuguese, in their ways of speaking, living, feeling, eating, and relating to others. And I know what I am talking about, because a large diaspora originated from our village.” (Abdula, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 1980, lawyer)

“You know, we who came from Mozambique, we were always very cosmopolitan. I’ll give you an example; my brothers. Abdul married a Pakistani woman from Punjab; the next brother, a Muslim girl of suri caste from Mozambique; the third one, a girl of memom caste, also from Mozambique; the following brother with a girl who’s Afro-Malayan or – Chinese. I’m not sure; another brother, like myself, married a suri girl from India and Burma. My sister married a Croatian man, a bagla who converted to the Muslim religion, my other sister married a Pakistani man, and my younger brother is going to marry a Bangladeshi from London next Saturday. Such openness to difference is impossible to those from Malawi.” (Latif, brother of Abdul, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 1979, trade manager)

“Yes, that’s true, Mozambican Muslims are by far the most integrated. Those who came from Malawi, they still cling to certain traditions.” (Zahir, maternal uncle of Abdul, born in Malawi, has been living in Leicester since 1978, businessman)

This possibility – that they themselves define as “cosmopolitan” – could itself be read as the product of “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other” (Hannerz 1996: 103), which results in a “power” of understanding of the world as lived by others, a power of translation (between languages, including those of
natives and colonisers), and improvisation (using the language of the other); but also of a power of transformation of oneself and the other (van der Veer 2002), promoted by the different circumstances of the (inter-racial, cultural, religious, etc.) encounter during the colonial administration, and by specific traits which they assign to the Portuguese cultural ecology.

Following their voices, this “cosmopolitan” heritage is also largely responsible for their current ways of thinking, living, relating, marrying, even for their identity self-presentation as Mozambican-Portuguese and Muslim, but more than anything, for their special enjoyment of inter-personal contact which contravened supposed borders and absence of (religious, ethno-cultural, gender, intergenerational, etc.) communication, which is manifest in their post-colonial cosmopolitan options.

“I am leading a project for the construction of a new mosque. Already in the time of the prophet, the mosque was more than anything a space for encounters. What we wish to do is to open the mosque, invite people of different faiths, to talk, to eat together, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Catholics. And also to invite other Muslim brothers, to try and end all the rivalries between mosques.” (Jamal)

“We are trying to organise a Portuguese club, […] for Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, it doesn’t matter. We are setting up a first meeting. We are going to get women and men together in the same room, serve some olives, cod cakes, Portuguese cheese, samosas, and shrimp, and we already contacted some boys who are going to sing fado. Imams here forbid music, but we are going to have music, they insist upon the separation of men and women, but we are going to get everyone together at the same table. Against religious sectarianism, we are going to get together Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims. We are going to mix, to show people here, Muslims or not, that we have a different way of life. And we are going to speak Portuguese.” (Amad)

The surreptitious accusation of excessive mimicry – contained in the expression “you are (like) baglás” – is not merely answered by Portuguese Muslims by a strategy of simple symmetrisation, i.e. the accusation of “parochialism” to their Muslim neighbours in Highfields or Spinney Hills. The emphasis upon the specificity of their colonial and post-colonial cosmopolitism is a wider strategy of construction of admirable exemplarity, which answers both the cosmopolitan colonial models of the Portuguese and the British (which are themselves considerably different), and the post-colonial options of involvement with the other, which are displayed both by their current “hosts”, and their Muslim peers.

You ought to be like us: “moderate” and “liberal”

A number of community leaders believe that the Muslim population living in Leicester has a strong conscience of their differences and religious rivalries. Despite this, at least in the public space, the Muslim ideal of equality, matched by an attitude that rejects criticism of “brothers” and a posture of (apparent) acceptance of intra-religious difference, is seen as better suited to certain values of British multiculturalism. This context helps to understand that fact that criticism or a harsh tone are more frequent in the discourses of Portuguese Muslims (especially the most recently arrived) upon their British peers, than the opposite.
“Usually the Muslims who came from Mozambique are more moderate, more liberal, more critical of religious sectarianism. I, for example, was even accused of being anti-Islamic. Here you cannot be critical of other brothers, otherwise you will not enter Paradise. [...] But at home, especially the elders, they spend their whole time saying, ‘don’t go to that mosque, they are deobandi’, ‘you cannot marry her, because her family is salafi and ours anti-salafi’.” (Moshin, born in Mozambique, has been living in Leicester since 2003, supervisor in a food factory)

Portuguese Muslims are in fact characterised as “moderate” Muslims, largely uninterested in factional rivalries and as “being against radicals”, by a number of British interviewees who see themselves mirrored in the same posture. They are therefore elevated as a counter-model to what they see as the “clear” increase – at the local, national, and international level – of fundamentalisms and religious sectarianisms (on the part of Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or Sikhs). However, in the eyes of a number of religious and community leaders, the element that most distinguishes them from other identity categories is the way in which they articulate their cultural, national, and religious identity, and how they present it to others.

The leading sheik in Leicester believes that Muslims who came from Mozambique or Portugal clearly contrast with “Indian Muslims” (including their Gujarati surti peers who came directly from India), who are self- and hetero-defined as those who most practice “religion as a way of life” and “are more careful in observing all religious laws and values”. They are also differentiated from the “Pakistanis” (in particular the older generations) who “condense their religious, national, linguistic and cultural identity into one”. And finally, they also differ from a significant percentage of East African Muslims who, despite sharing a number of cultural references (of origin, caste, previous context of migration, etc.), have been emphasizing their Muslim identity. Once again quoting his words, they are described as being different in the way in which they attempt to emphasise the specificity of their identity as Portuguese Muslims.

“From the religious perspective, I do not think that there are significant differences between the Sunnis who came from Portugal and those who came, for example, from Malawi. They are relatively moderately people in religious terms. But if you ask me how I feel, how I define myself, I will tell you I am of Indian origin, I was born in Malawi, I learnt to speak the native language and through it also absorbed much of the African culture and ways of thinking, and that I have been living in Leicester for many years. I have numerous references, but my strongest identity is being a Muslim. However, if you ask those who came from Mozambique and Portugal how do they define themselves, I suspect that they will answer they are Portuguese of Muslim religion.” (Yossuf, born in Malawi, has been living in Leicester since 1978, senior member of the Muslim Council of Britain and the Leicester Council of Faiths)

The Portuguese Muslims recognise themselves in religious moderation, with a lack of interest in arguments and factional struggles. In the presentation of their identity as “Portuguese (or Mozambicans) of Muslim religion”, the main criticism they direct at their “brothers” relates to the ways in which they reconstruct, experience and enunciate their religious “difference” in non-Muslim contexts of migration. Other than closure upon themselves and ethno-religious sectarianism, the act
of making Muslim identity visible – and, in particular, the issue of the veil (and of full-body veiling) – is a frequent theme in their narratives.

“In Portugal and even in Mozambique we were more liberal. […] Our women, they too are very religious, but they do not go around completely veiled.” (Sodagar, born in Daman, has been living in Leicester since 1995, retired)

“In Leicester, most girls cover their heads, especially if they live in a Muslim area. Some use the veil because of their faith, because it has a special significance to them. But there also are those who are forced by the parents to veil completely. […] I am very proud to say that I am a Muslim, but I do not need to cover my head.” (Nadia, living in Portugal, has several family members living in Spinney Hills)

“As I usually say, a Muslim who lives in Portugal, who has lived in Mozambique, he has Satan in his eyes, in a manner of speaking. I’ll explain […] In my religion, we usually say that woman, when she ventures outside the house, she is turned into Satan, because with her sensuality she may ensnare whoever she wishes. […] I would like to cover myself, for myself, but I need to see unveiled people […] Saying this is a sin for a Muslim like me, but it is true. And if many of us prefer life in Portugal, this is because we like to have in our eyes exactly that which each person sees.” (Soraia)

“The blood of a Muslim is worthless, after all …”

Werbner (2002) and Geaves (2005) believe that the peaceful demonstrations of disagreement, resistance, and indignation of a significant part of the Muslim population of the U.K. in the Stop The War Coalition temporarily brought rival Muslim groups and sub-groups together, thus weakening representation and argumentation struggles between them, while at the same time indicating a change in their mobilisation and political participation. The debates about identity under way between Portuguese and British Muslims did not escape unscathed. The precise historical circumstances and the surrounding cultural ecology itself, both at the local and national level, therefore seem to have a considerable influence upon inter-identity dynamics. The majority of Portuguese Muslims living in Leicester, like their British peers, disagreed with the invasion of Iraq on the part of American, British and allied troops, and with the support granted by the Portuguese government to Prime Minister Blair and President Bush. Especially after the 7th of July 2005, even those who stated that they understood in part the position of the British Prime Minister, as well as Labour Party supporters, stated that the war had been a mistake that urgently needed correcting – or at least, acknowledging – on the part of the governments involved.

“I believe that Blair was morally and legally wrong. […] The Leicester council had been dominated by Labour for thirty years, and because of general discontent, on the part of Muslims and non-Muslims, on the invasion of Iraq, Labour lost here1. And Leicester was a Labour bastion.” (Amad)

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1 Leicester is a good example of the success of Labour Party candidates of Muslim religion in local governmental election. According to Vertovec, over ten years ago, “the city of Leicester
On the other hand, all the Muslims we interviewed (Portuguese and British) mentioned without any external encouragement their concern with terrorism, foreign and national politics. And despite their anxiety relating to the new legislation upon freedom of expression, none of them renounced their democratic rights to oppose or question British governmental policies, as well as Anglo-American geopolitics itself.

Equally relevant was the way in which they conveyed to non-Muslim interlocutors that the 7th of July had relegated to the background, at least temporarily, certain ideological, factional, political, religious, and other communication impossibilities between Muslims. And this is not merely attributable to the tendency to emphasise Muslim unity, especially when Muslims speak to non-Muslim researchers whose explicit or implicit intention lay in uncovering and analysing intra-religious rivalries (King 1997: 133). The period after 7th July and the local context, including efforts to create a common Muslim front to negotiate with political authorities such as the Leicester Federation of Muslim Organisations, has been clear – provide a better explanation for the attenuation (albeit temporary) of the lack of unity within and among the approximately thirty mosques in Leicester (Vertovec & Peach 1997: 30).

Issues such as Islamic terrorism, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the unresolved problems of Palestine and Kashmir, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the armed struggle in Chechnya, or the strategies of “ethnic cleansing” against Bosnian Muslims, and so forth, frequently appear in the interviews carried out amongst Portuguese and British Muslims, and require that we consider the impact of the supra-national and geo-strategic dimension of historical relations between the various competitive components of the world system in the dynamic (re)structuring of personal identity systems more or less shared.

Specifically, their attempt to understand and rationalize the recent terrorist attacks in London clearly emphasised the need to articulate recent international political history with long-term identity processes, and the latter with local identity processes which reconfigure them and provide the necessary identifications and emotions, both for or against violent actions, and for peaceful, locally rooted, resistance and struggle.

“I do not believe much in sociological explanations. There are many impoverished young people, unemployed, who are also targeted by racism [...] Somalis, Moroccans, Sikhs, etc. They too have problems of social exclusion, but they do not explode bombs in the Tube. It was some Muslim youngsters, British Muslims, and not political refugees, but youngsters who were born here, who have a high level of education, and who are not particularly poor. And why? I believe that the explanation is more political. These young men began to understand through the TV and the internet what had been going on with Muslims all over the world. Even I, when I remember all the atrocities committed against Muslims, civilians, innocent, I feel incensed. And this is where radical clerics come in, those who are called radical Islamists. But it also is where international politics comes in, supplying very powerful arguments to demonstrate that this is a war against Muslims. Just think about Iraq and Afghanistan, and

not only has produced a number of Muslim city and country councillors, but also a Muslim Chief Executive (alongside a Muslim Police Superintendent).” (Vertovec & Peach 1997: 35)
it is easy to reach the conclusion that the blood of thousands and thousands of Muslims is less important that the blood of British and American soldiers, that the blood of a Muslim, after all, is worthless. This causes much pain, rage, humiliation…” (Yossuf)

The first aspect we wish to highlight is that the “sociological explanation”, centred upon the detection and correction of racially-based inequalities in the organisation of daily life (housing, education, health, work, etc.) within a specific social context (in this case, the British), as well as the attempts to document, monitor, and correct them with legal action, was revealed as irrelevant, or won the status of a necessary but insufficient condition to justify the motivations of “terrorist” action. In the words of various interviewees, September 11th could not be explained by the characteristics of American society, March 11th by those of the Spanish ones, or the recent attacks in London by those of the British society.

In a similar way, the distinctive characteristics of Muslim populations integrated in different local and national contexts, the re-ignition of sectarianism and religious fundamentalisms, as well as the proliferation of ideologies defined as radical and extremist were not by themselves sufficient explanations to understand the motivation of the young Muslims involved in the attacks.

“Despite what people say, we live in an increasingly less tolerant world. There is an increase of fundamentalism, in all religions. Islam is no exception. […] There were men who took advantage of religion, who spoke in the name of Islam, to fire jihad up. Then, as now, these radicals brainwash young people, promising them paradise after death. I cannot accept these suicide bombers. But let it also be known, this is not just religion. British foreign policies have been a great mistake.” (Abdula)

The finger was also pointed towards community leaders, who were supposedly more preoccupied with the prestige-laden control of the public space of community activities than with the emergence of “extremist cells”, at parental generations for their lack of involvement in the political-religious identifications of emerging generations, or at those who expected local solutions at the community and/or family level for the bombings of 7th July, but all of these potential culprits were readily relegated to the backstage.

“Some blame the parents because they did not control their offspring. But the young will not tell their parents that they were contacted by Hizb-al-Tahrir or Al-Muhajiroun or any other Islamic extremist group. It doesn’t happen in the madrasas, where small children go, that they are brainwashed. They do not deliver their speeches in the mosques of Leicester. Not even at University, they were banned. It mostly happens over the internet, and in some places we know nothing about, that’s where the radicals attempt to mobilise the young. They ask questions that these young people, that we ourselves cannot answer. ‘Why have Western countries only attacked Muslims over the past few years? ’ ‘Why were Bosnian Muslims the victims of such atrocities?’ Because they were Muslims, that’s their answer. Why are there bloody conflicts in Palestine and Kashmir which governments have no interest in solving? Because the involve Muslims. Why did Westerners invade Afghanistan and Iraq? Because they are anti-Muslim. These extremists divide the world between bad guys and victims. The victims are always Muslims […]’. These arguments have a lot of impact on certain youngsters, they provide them with a cause. They are very excited with the idea that they can change the world, they can see justice done to Muslims, that they can overturn all the humiliation and suffering which thousands and thousands of Muslims have
undergone. From that to encourage them towards self-sacrifice, it’s just one step. And religious reward, if you press the detonator, you can go straight to heaven, it ends up working. But world leaders do not wish to understand that international policies which have systematically attacked and humiliated Muslims, will strengthen radicalisation, the politicisation of religion, as they say now.” (Gulamo)

If we agree with Thomas Scheff (1996) in supposing that emotions are the psychological side of social relations, and that these are the social aspect of emotions, then the empathy of identification towards the suffering of Muslim communities, the identity rage for the fact that “the blood of a Muslim, after all, is worthless to the eyes of Westerners” and the resulting feeling of humiliation could be the prime movers behind violent, vengeful, or compensatory action. These emotions are difficult to elaborate, and they would therefore push certain young men to retaliatory actions capable of restoring hope in the subversion of the degrading status quo and in the rehabilitation of a feeling of dignity, lost in the context of non-diplomatic relations from which the inter-identity “respect” which results from a policy of recognition had vanished.

“Most Muslims, at least here in Leicester, are very conscious of the double standard of British politics. Blair and Bush first defended Saddam Hussein, then attacked him. They speak of democracy, but they support the regime of Saudi Arabia, where there are different laws for nationals and foreigners, and Musharraf in Pakistan, who seized power with a coup. They speak of the war on terror, but they support Israel. When thousands of Palestinian civilians are killed, they call it war, when the Palestinians set off a bomb and kill Israeli civilians, they call it terrorism. Thousands and thousands of Muslims already died in Iraq. Muslims and non-Muslims were together against the war. Most Britons were against the war, and they took to the streets to say so. But Blair said no. Is this democracy?” (Firoza)

“When fifty-two people die in London, it is a tragedy, it is painful for me and everybody else. But when thousands of Muslims in countries such as Iraq die, it doesn’t seem to matter. It’s unfair, angering. Almost as if the blood of a Muslim was cheap, nobody wants to know, the more the better, for the interests of Blair and Bush. I have to make an effort to be rational here. We live in a democracy, full of imperfections, but in which I believe. It may take ten, twenty, thirty years, but I am not going to set a bomb off to see justice done.” (Moshin)

Most interviewees, when confronted and moved by similar emotional dilemmas, refuse however to “react to a mistake with the same mistake, because two wrongs will never make a right”. Despite the widespread recognition of the “double standard” of so-called democratic practice – and in particular of the way it actually promotes the interests of a few leaders of the world-system, providing moral legitimacy to their decisions – they still believe in the long-term effectiveness of forms of negotiated transformation of the world system, currently seen as unfair and traumatic.

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¹ A quote from the public speech delivered by Yossuf at the Masjid Umar in Evington, Leicester on 23 July 2005.
Based on a case study in identity relations we hope to have shown that the colonial phase of expansion of the global market did not merely create the conditions for an ambivalent identification of the colonised with their colonisers, but also a hierarchical differentiation of the colonisers (Sousa Santos 2001). This hierarchisation greatly influenced the development of subjective identity constructions of the middlemen minorities of Indian origin who settled in African territories under British or Portuguese administration, which constructed “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) upon their ambivalent identification with their respective colonisers.

The hierarchical identifications of the colonial phase did not lose their relevance in the post-colonial phase of the world-system construction. On the contrary, they still provide a source of idioms for the differentiated construction of new categories of identity and new supporting arguments for the post-colonial management of power dynamics (Bastos & Bastos 2005). However, in the most recent history, there have been strategic attempts by all parts to binarise Anglo-American geo-strategic interests – frequently labelled “Western” (polarised in the Israeli-Arab conflict, but also in the wars of invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq) – in the attempt create a “clash of civilisations” (Huntington 1996). The hegemonic civilisational hierarchy underlying this much-quoted “clash” does not eliminate identity idioms built in the past. But it does require new ways of constructing Muslim diasporic identity discourses in their communities, which are likely to criticise and upturn the excess of superiorisation and civilisational humiliation upon which the world system as currently perceived is based.

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Bibliography

THE BLOOD OF A MUSLIM IS WORTHLESS, AFTER ALL


