

The Construction of Muslim Identities in Contemporary Brazil

*Cristina Maria de Castro (trans. Rodrigo Braga Freston)
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 182 pages.*

This sociological study on the plural and often contested construction of Muslim identities in Brazil contributes to a growing scholarship on Islam and the politics of religious difference across the Atlantic. Focusing on two institutions in São Paulo state – the Islamic Center of Campinas (Centro Islâmico de Campinas) and the Islamic Charity Youth League of Brazil (Liga da Juventude Islâmica Beneficente do Brasil), located in the Brás neighborhood of São Paulo city – Cristina Maria de Castro’s book frames the negotiation of what it means to be Muslim in Brazil and in the wider ummah not only with regard to the historical *longue durée* and plural religious field, but also in terms of gender and ethnic politics. By focusing on this “range and diversity of [an] Islamic diaspora,”¹ to use the words of Gayatri Spivak, this book will help “undo the politically monolithized view of Islam that rules the globe today.”

Based on a doctoral dissertation at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar, São Paulo state) and post-doctoral research at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (Leiden University), Castro’s work also speaks to the increasing internationalization of the Brazilian social sciences. During the twentieth century, many sociologists, anthropologists, and others in Brazil were limited by what Andrew Wimmer and Nina Glick-Schiller have criticized as “methodological nationalism,” namely, car-

rying out their research within the nation's boundaries.² Now based at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Castro studied Islam in Brazil with regard to not only the transnational networks, imagined or otherwise, of two Muslim institutions located in São Paulo state, but also the equally far-flung circulation of orientalist, Islamophobic images that members of these and other institutions face in their quotidian lives. Although frequently referencing Friday sermons and conversations that took place within the institutions under study, the author seeks to grasp these discourses within national and transnational contexts. Culminating in a comparative chapter on Islam in the Netherlands and Brazil, this book reveals a Brazilian social science that is globalizing its agenda today.

Without mentioning these broader implications of her work, the introduction, methodology section, and first chapter provide a general overview of Islam in Brazil, including a nearly exhaustive list of mosques and Muslim associations across the country. Castro is careful to describe and analyze the inter-ethnic dynamics, class power, and gender politics that inform the two institutions under study; however, she does not say very much about doctrinal and intra-religious differences. The Islamic Center of Campinas is older and more heterogeneous in terms of its immigrant membership's national origins. The Islamic Youth League of Brazil in São Paulo, for its part, is made up of many Syrian-Lebanese immigrants and descendants (called "sírio-libaneses," a moniker often used in Brazil). Importantly, the author points out that immigrants in present-day Brazilian society are generally represented, by themselves and others, as garnering economic privilege and experiencing upward social mobility, unlike the images of migrants in Europe or North America, who are frequently viewed as draining or threatening the wealth of the host country. The memberships of each institution are composed of mostly business or liberal professionals, and their religious or social gatherings usually attract more men than women. This attention to ethnicity, class, and gender cuts across these and subsequent chapters; however, there is a need to more deliberately conceptualize such intersectionality.

The chapter on Islam within a plural religious field looks at how Muslims represent themselves and their faith in relation to not only Roman Catholicism, which still dominates the Brazilian public sphere, but also with regard to the growing array of Pentecostal denominations. Those born in or new to Islam emphasize the religion's openness. Although not explicitly stated by the author, this framing of Islam reflects the widespread Brazilian nationalist claims of a "culture of cordiality" as well as the myth of little or no racial discrimination. At the same time, during Friday sermons and in other public venues,

Muslim religious authorities point out that the Catholic Church itself respects Islam and even quote Vatican declarations to substantiate this ostensibly mutual recognition. As can be discerned in such “interreligious” references, Islam is generally imagined with regard to Catholicism, and not the broad range of other religious and spiritual formations in Brazil, including Candomblé, Umbanda, and Kardecism. Castro highlights that Pentecostals, especially members of Brazil’s largest congregation, the Assembly of God, adopt the most pernicious views of Islam. Although tending to avoid this sort of provocation, members of each Islamic institution seek wider recognition by referencing their faith in relation to the Catholic Church.

Some of the book’s most intriguing aspects are related to gender and ethnic politics. At the beginning, Castro relates her experience as a (presumably non-Arab and non-Muslim) Brazilian woman in the Islamic Center of Campinas. “It is not uncommon,” she writes, “to think that Brazilian women go to that mosque ‘searching for a husband,’” especially given the non-Arab, non-Muslim Brazilian female members of the center who married Arab Muslim male immigrants (pp. 12, 26). This made me wonder about how gender politics, which cut across ethnic lines within an Islamic space, actually overlap with Brazilian nationalist notions of mixture (*mestiçagem*, or simply, *mistura*), a point that would support one of Castro’s goals: to situate Muslim identity politics in Brazilian society. Nonetheless, the book attends to Brazilian orientalist notions regarding Muslim women, the patriarchies they face in multiple contexts, as well as how they confront and challenge them. Building on the work of Silvia Montenegro,³ Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto,⁴ and others, the author also explores the ethnic politics of Islam in Brazil, whereby a universal religion is often constructed and contested in particular, ethnic ways. Arab immigrants and descendants often consider themselves, and are sometimes viewed by others as, the most authentic Muslims, while the small but growing number of Brazilian converts and other non-Arabs attempt to “reassert their righteousness and rigor” in the ummah (p. 155). Women and men, of course, experience these ethnic politics of religious belonging in distinctive and unequal ways.

Written in an accessible style, but not without some awkward grammar and phrasing by the translator, *The Construction of Muslim Identities in Contemporary Brazil* will fit into university courses in Brazilian or Latin American studies as well as religious studies or the social sciences. In crossing boundaries conventionally upheld by area studies as well as the disciplines, this book will push students and non-specialists in Europe or the United States to learn of these heretofore understudied politics of religious difference across unexpected geographies.

Endnotes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 87.
2. Andrew Wimmer and Nina Glick-Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration, and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2 (2002): 301-34.
3. Silvia Montenegro, "Discursos e contradiscursos: O olhar da mídia sobre o Islã no Brasil," *Mana* 8 (2002): 63-91 and "Identidades muçulmanas no Brasil: entre o arabismo e a islamização," *Lusotopie* 2 (2002): 59-79.
4. Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto, *Árabes no Rio de Janeiro: uma identidade plural* (Rio de Janeiro: Cidade Viva Editora, 2010).

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