

How Muslims Found a Home and Thrived in Brazil

Contributed by Alexandre Rocha
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Those interested in the history of Arab immigration to Brazil have just been provided with one more source of information: a doctoral thesis on the Muslim Arab immigration in the Brazilian southern state of Paraná.

At the end of last month, journalist Omar Nasser Filho, from Paraná, was granted the title of master in history by the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), after defending the thesis "The Crescent and the Star in the Land of the Pines: the Muslim Arabs in Curitiba", a work he intends to make into a book in the future.

"History has always interested me and I am Muslim. Due to this curiosity I started looking for information on the matter and had a hard time finding it. There are practically no books about the matter," he said.

There are works about the Arab immigration to the country, according to him, but nothing specifically about the Muslim presence. "Then came the opportunity of, regarding Curitiba, talking about these immigrants, where they came from and how they got on here," he added.

The research began two and a half years ago and Nasser researched public files in the state, documents of the Muslim Beneficent Society and collected information about immigrants and their descendants. He limited his work to the period between 1945 and 1984.

It was after the war that immigration of Muslim Arabs to Brazil became stronger. Before that, the vast majority of Arabs that established themselves in Brazil was Christian. "This is an interesting figure, most of the Muslim immigration is relatively recent," he said.

According to him, the factors on the international scenery that influenced the flow were the opening of international frontiers after the Second World War, the start of conflicts in the Middle East due to the creation of the state of Israel and the lack of economic perspectives of the region.

In the internal area, Brazil was undergoing a period of industrial development aligned with a policy of relaxation with regard to the immigration legislation.

"They saw new perspectives in Brazil," stated Nasser. During the decades of 1950 and 1960, Curitiba underwent a period of growth fueled by the development of the coffee and infrastructure sector in the state. "Immigrants started seeing the city as viable," he added.

Origins

According to him, there are no statistical figures about the number of Muslim Arabs living in the capital of the state of Paraná. The Muslim Beneficent Society, however, estimates that the population is around 500 families, or about 2,000 people. In the state registries, Nasser discovered that 79% of these immigrants are of Lebanese origin, 13% Palestinian and 8% Syrian.

Like their countrymen who started arriving in the country at the end of the 19th century, most of the Muslims of Curitiba started operating in trade. The economic profile of these families, however, was already a little different. Although some worked as travelling salesmen, others even opened their own businesses.

Another factor that boosted the migratory flow, according to Nasser, was what historian Neuza Neif Nabhan called the "chain of calls". "The person comes here, establishes himself, and his life improves. He then calls relatives, neighbors, etc.," stated the journalist.

"The concept of 'family' among the Arabs is not that of the 'nuclear family'. For example, I asked one of the immigrants how many people there were in his family. He answered: three hundred! That is, the concept is that of a clan," he added.

In this manner, the Arabs who were already in Brazil, even the Christians, helped influence the arrival of the Muslims, and their establishing roots in the country helped maintain the migratory flow during the following decades, especially the 1970s and 1980s with the civil war in Lebanon.

A unique characteristic of the colony in Curitiba is that, in the beginning, most of the immigrants were Shiite, the minority in Islam. That is why the mosque in the capital of the state of Paraná is named after Imam Ali, the founder of the denomination. After the 1970s, however, the flow of Sunni Muslims grew. "Today there is great integration," stated

Nasser.

Two were the main difficulties of the immigrants researched by Nasser: problems of economic order and cultural and religious differences. In the first case, the journalist stated that, in the general balance, the families were successful, but not all.

"There is a different side, that of the immigrant who came and did not have economic success." He tells the story of one of the interviewees, the son of Lebanese parents, who takes care of cars in the street.

Cultural Adaptation

In the religious area, as most of the Brazilian population is Christian, there were also difficulties for adaptation. "There are people who maintained their religious practices intact and others that changed their culture," he said.

A middle ground was also found, in the case of community members who exhibit strong traces of both cultures. One of the cases mentioned was that of a girl he interviewed who dresses and acts like a typical Brazilian during her daily life, but considers the Muslim religion essential to her life.

Among the interviews he made, one he considers symbolic was with an immigrant who arrived in Brazil at the age of 15 and who is currently around 60, well established and with sons. He said that they "learnt how to be Muslims in Brazil".

"The contrast between people does not exist when you live with people of the same culture. But when you migrate to another country and have to relate to different people, then comes the need to recreate spaces and conserve ethnic and cultural traditions," stated Nasser.

And in the same manner in which Brazilian customs influenced the Arabs and their descendents, the inverse movement also took place. After the arrival of the Muslims, Curitiba saw the establishment of the Beneficent Society in 1957, of the Imam Ali mosque in 1972, and of the Garden of Allah Cemetery in 1984, the end of the period studied by Nasser.

"Other examples are people who convert themselves to Islam, be they of Arab descent or not," stated the journalist. He himself may be one of the subjects of his thesis.

He is a grandson of Maronite Lebanese Christians on his father's side, and of Germans on his mother's side, apart from being married to a woman of Polish descent, he converted himself to the Islamic religion at his own will.

"Since I was a child I had been greatly attracted to the Arab culture, which has a strong Islamic influence," he said. Graduated in journalism and economics, Nasser is a journalist at the Federation of Industries of the State of Paraná and the Brazil-Arab News Agency contributor.

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