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Sense of community among Muslims in the Brazil–Paraguay border: narratives of belonging and generational differences

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ABSTRACT
The so-called 'Triple Frontier'—the border between Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina—is the 'host society' of an important Muslim community, composed mainly of Lebanese immigrants and their descendants born in Brazil and Paraguay. In less than two decades, Shi'i and Sunni Arab Muslims created mosques, religious centres, a cemetery, and three schools. Mosques, schools, and religious centres are spaces for the production of a sense of community. The institutional discourse of these entities emphasises the connection between religion and community origin, considering Islam as part of 'Arab culture'. Taking generational differences into account, this article aims to analyse the narratives of plural identity expressed in the meanings attributed to the immigrants' self-identification as Muslims. Based on fieldwork in the South American border area, this work aims to shed light on the way in which immigrants and their descendants reinterpret their religious belonging, informed by the new experience of living in multi-religious societies.

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Introduction

The so-called 'Triple Frontier' (the border between Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina) is the 'host society' of an important Muslim community, composed mainly of Lebanese immigrants and their descendants born in Brazil and Paraguay. According to their sectarian affiliations, both groups founded institutional spaces: schools, mosques, and both Shiite and Sunni religious centres.[1] In focusing on generational differences, my research deals with the ways in which the processes of these immigrants' self-identification as Muslims are expressed in different identity narratives. My ethnographic approach seeks to show the dynamic relationship between religious identities and forms of territorialisation in border areas, focusing on categories such as sense of community, identity, and cultural boundaries. I pay particular attention to the way in which immigrants and descendants reinterpret their religious belonging, compare lifestyles, and

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construct their own experiences of localisation in the South American border area.

The Triple Frontier emerges at the intersection of three neighbouring cities with an important movement of people, goods, and meanings. The three urban centres are interconnected by bridges, but the cities are demographically and economically different. *Foz do Iguaçu*, on the Brazilian side, is the most densely populated, with more infrastructure and tourist activity due to the *Cataratas do Iguaçu* national park. *Ciudad del Este*, on the Paraguayan side, moves at the pace of trade. The Argentine city of *Puerto Iguazú* is the smallest city; its activity is also connected with tourism, as it has access to the national park on the Argentine side. [2] While the Paraguayan and the Brazilian sides form a *continuum* of movement and commercial activity, the Argentine side does not participate in this dynamics and the customs and documentation controls of people in transit are stricter on this side of the border.[3]

The region has brought together groups of different cultural origins in the last four decades: Paraguayans, Argentinians, Brazilians, Koreans, Chinese, indigenous peoples, Bengalis, Lebanese, and Palestinians. These immigrants share (at different stratification levels) the occupational *niche* of wholesale, retail, and import trade, given Ciudad del Este's free-port dynamics. Arab Muslim pioneers arrived at the border in the 1950s from Lebanon and to a lesser extent from Palestine, but also from other parts of Brazil and Paraguay.[4] They make up a small group of pioneering families. From the second half of the 1980s, the most significant flow of Lebanese immigrants occurred, predominantly from the regions in conflict in South Lebanon,[5] with most of them coming directly from their homeland or arriving after having lived for a while in other countries. Many immigrants established a dual residence pattern: having set up business in Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), they spend their working day on that side of the border and return to the Brazilian side once the business hours are over. Others work and live in the same city, either Foz do Iguaçu or Ciudad del Este.[6] This community comprises 18,000 people in total—12,000 in Foz do Iguaçu and the rest in Ciudad del Este, 90% of whom are Lebanese; there is also a small Palestinian community made up of nearly 50 families, located in Foz do Iguaçu, and a small number of Egyptians and Jordanians living in both cities. Some immigrants of other descent—Bengalis, Pakistanis, and Indians—interact with Arab communities as members of the same religion, Islam. There are thus three groups in terms of generations: the pioneers of 1950s and 1960s, the immigrants of the mid-1980s—who are more numerous—and their descendants born in Paraguay and Brazil.

Pioneers, immigrants of the mid-1980s, and descendants build a sense of community based on their perceptions and experiences in everyday local life. In this article I consider the relationships between the institutional discourse that

condenses and reifies the 'official portrayal' of community identity and the pioneers' narrative. In both cases, the border is thought of as a territory in which the Arab Muslim community is integrated in economic, cultural, and political terms. This is why the establishment of schools and institutions was a project aimed at preserving the cultural and religious legacy for future generations. Later we will see how the immigrants who arrived after the 1980s and their descendants seem to build more hybridised ways of belonging, reinterpret their religious belonging, compare and contrast lifestyles, and tell their own experiences of localisation at the border. During my fieldwork, I participated in activities both inside and outside the institutional landscape of Arab Islamic communities in the Triple Frontier. Schools, mosques, and social and religious events were fundamental scenarios of my participant observation on the Brazil–Paraguay border. Outside the institutional spaces, in Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguaçu, almost all the principal informants were Lebanese men and their descendants, whom I interviewed at their workplaces or in more informal spaces.[7]

The sense of community in the narratives of the informants on both sides of the border does not appear as a common rhetoric of monolithic belonging to the Muslim religion. Rather, we encounter a variability of belonging (Calhoun, 2003, 563–564). Individuals 'participate' in various—contextual and generational—forms of religious identification, rather than define or do not define themselves as members of Muslim communities.

There is a set of narratives dealing with the sense of living at the border regarding social spaces and the generational anchors of the various groups of individuals. Here, 'border' has, on the one hand, a literal, physical meaning and, on the other hand, a symbolic meaning. The first of these meanings refers to the fact of living in the confluence of the legal boundaries of three countries, whereas the second involves perceiving oneself or feeling perceived as culturally different or 'in-between'. The different narratives of staying at the border are associated with forms of experience that help us understand the heterogeneity of identity constructions within a group usually considered homogeneous. We know that: people construct identities by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of stories; 'experience' is constituted through narratives; people make sense of what has happened or is happening to them by attempting to integrate these events within one or more narratives; people are guided to act in certain ways and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity, but ultimately limited repertoire, of available social, public, and cultural narratives (Somers 1994, 614). Accounts of the migration experience of arriving, living, and interacting at the border, developed by Arab Muslim immigrants and their descendants, are incorporated into narratives of work, religion, and generational differences. These three narrative spaces reinforce or soften cultural boundaries in the

context of experiences of territorialisation in the Triple Frontier. I will start by briefly analysing the way in which Arab Muslim immigrants have been defined by discourses external to the region. I will then outline the narratives of the pioneers, the immigrants of the 1980s, and their descendants born in Paraguay and Brazil, considering the different constructions of cultural boundaries.

Media narratives about Muslims and the region

The visible presence of the Arab Muslim community has nurtured two interconnected imaginaries that have monopolised the view of the region over the last two decades. These discourses mark the way in which the Muslim community has been portrayed globally rather than locally.

Since the 1990s, but more intensely since 9/11, the region has started to appear in the international as well as the domestic press of the three countries as a space associated with 'Islamic terrorism', due to the presence of a visible Arab Muslim community. The name 'Tri-Border Area' (TBA) arose as the region started to be construed as news in the international and domestic press. For almost a decade, the area was portrayed as a singular place, some of the metaphors used included 'a lawless land', 'a space out of state control', 'a grey area', and 'a dangerous territory'. Along with this portrayal, such discourses warned of the need to reinforce regional security agendas in the fight against 'global terrorism'.[8] The Triple Frontier was also included in reports by the US Department of State and in the discourse of governmental agencies from Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, without ever losing its character of 'transnational space'. Fanciful stories about Bin Laden's visit to Triple Frontier mosques and the existence of training camps run by terrorist groups were also part of the media coverage (Montenegro and Giménez Béliveau 2006, 43–66). The Arab Muslim community organised itself through a series of movements supported by the local civil society in order to repudiate such stigmatising campaigns (Karam 2011).

Other actors also started questioning the view of the press and some local and American governmental agencies. Environmental organisations, alternative news agencies, social associations, religious leaders, and regional social forums participated in an ideological constellation that started to define the Triple Frontier as a target for the greed of foreign countries interested in its natural resources. For such actors, the Triple Frontier became a metaphor for a space of resistance, not against terrorism, but against other threats: the militarisation of the region, the ravaging of bio-diversity as a global public good, and the risks involved in increased social control, topics making up an anti-imperialist and strongly Latin Americanist discourse (Montenegro and Giménez Béliveau 2006, 125–132).

These discourses and counter-discourses generated a polarisation in the way the region was depicted. Without denying the negative impact on individuals and the community,[9] it is important to acknowledge that, following this process, Muslim communities at the border emerged the stronger. During this time, they managed to build greater dialogue with local civil societies and made better organised policies to negotiate their public visibility. For example, mosques were included in tour maps and guided tours to visit them were organised, documentaries and leaflets were released explaining the pillars of the religion and extolling the peaceful coexistence of all the ethnic groups in the region. Paradoxically, this process favoured the Muslim community's territorialisation in the local space of the Triple Frontier. One of the reasons is that all the local actors, including Muslims, have interpreted this process in 'glocal' terms, considering that stigmatising the Muslim community meant stigmatising the region itself, understanding media coverage as a global process that affected the sovereignty of Paraguay, Brazil or Argentina.[10]

The pioneers' discourse and institutional narratives of identity

As mentioned above, the migration process is divided into two phases: the first group arrived between 1950 and 1960 and a second and more important flow of Lebanese immigrants arrived in the mid-1980s. There are thus the three groups, as indicated, following the different generations—the immigrants of the two phases and their descendants—who founded, according to their sectarian affiliations, their respective institutional spaces.

I will briefly refer to the institutional spaces that convey the official discourse of the Muslims living at the Brazil–Paraguay border. Currently existing institutions in the region stem from the plans of two types of agents: the pioneers, already settled and economically prosperous, and the immigrants who arrived in the 1980s. In 1962, the pioneers created one of the few non-denominational institutions, *Clube União Árabe*, which later stopped operating for decades, but has recently been revitalised. While the club is open to the Lebanese community, it is more frequented by Sunni families during weekends for sports or other recreational activities.

In the late 1970s, Sunni Muslims, accounting for about 50% of the community, created the *Foz do Iguaçu* Muslim Charity. The same group founded the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab mosque in 1983. In 1986, Shiites founded the Islamic Association of Foz do Iguaçu; by the early 1990s, the building which also houses the Imam Al-Khomeini mosque was completed. On the Paraguayan side of the frontier, the Shiite Muslims opened the Prophet Muhammad mosque in 1994. In Ciudad del Este, the Ibrahim mosque was founded by Sunni Muslims. In April 2012, Sunnis who are organised around the Paraguayan Islamic Arab Centre—it had only a prayer room in Ciudad

del Este—laid the foundation stone for building the Alkhaulafa Al-Rashdeen mosque, a cultural complex of over 3,500 square metres; it was completed in 2015. Thus, religious associations created by the Arab community show the divisions between Sunnis and Shiites, regardless of the common national origins (Lebanese) of both groups.[11]

Mosques and religious centres are spaces for the production of a sense of community. On the one hand, to a non-Muslim audience, leaders and institutional representatives address a discourse promoting internal unity, relativising the distinction between Sunnis and Shiites. On the other hand, individuals within both groups typically naturalise this division, considering it a constitutive difference that is perpetuated in the local space. International conflict, involving different positions within the wide range of Muslim countries, such as the civil war in Syria, cause an increasing impact on the establishment of sectarian boundaries. Logically, the Shiites' orientation towards religious and education centres in the Islamic Republic of Iran is not shared by the Sunni community. One could argue that the sectarian division is acknowledged or relativised according to specific contexts where discourses on the community are produced. For example, some of the respondents, identifying themselves as Arabs or Lebanese, regretted the 'lack of unity' within the community, which in their opinion should show itself cohesive since, ultimately, all members shared the same religion. Other participants in the study, who are active leaders in community organisations, showed concern for the increasing distance between Sunnis and Shiites and found the explanation for this in the local impact of international conflicts. In such discourses, this distance was seen as an obstacle for undertaking activities that once used to bind the whole Arab community together, as they celebrated the customs and cultural traditions of their country of origin. In short, when the narrative focuses on the assertion of an identification as Arabs or Lebanese, the sectarian religious division tends to be either minimised or identified as a problem that needs to be overcome. At the same time, when discourses refer to group-specific religious adherence, the Sunni/Shiite division is usually acknowledged as a natural difference, irreversibly 'imported' from the homeland. This contextual meaning can best be understood if group identities are not taken for granted in analysing sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shiites and in the appeal to 'ethnicity' as a unifying element. While the divisions are institutionalised and one might attribute interests and agencies to these groups, both unifying ethnicisation and disruptive sectarianisation operate as "contingent events" (Brubaker 2002, 167).

After the mid-1990s, one of the projects of the pioneering immigrants started to materialise—the creation of Arab schools. One of the oldest schools of this kind is located on the Paraguayan side of the border,

established by the *Alto Paraná* Islamic Charity and opened in 1995. Its name, the Lebanese School in Ciudad del Este, has no religious connotations; however, it is regularly attended by 350 Shiite pupils. On the Brazilian side, there are two schools. The Brazilian Lebanese School, linked with the Shiite community, started operating in the early 1990s and has now over 700 pupils. The Brazilian Arab School is the newest. Opened in 1998, it now has 480 pupils. While most are from the Sunni community, both headteacher and teachers state that the institution ignores religious differences.

Mosques and religious centres pertaining to both branches of Islam have in common the production of a narrative that upholds the idea of Islam as a cultural legacy, as an immigrants' tradition of origin, as a constitutive element of their culture. In these institutions, the ethnic (Arab) and the religious (Islamic) identities are synonymous—being Arab in the border region means being Muslim and being Muslim means being Arab. According to their founders' discourse, such institutions would play the following roles: preserving religion among younger generations and keeping alive cultural customs and the Arabic language. The institutional discourse in schools, mosques, and religious centres makes the existence of these institutions a turning point. They are expected to serve as spaces for cultural and religious reproduction, thereby ensuring that young people will not lose their Muslim origins, the Arabic language, and their cultural customs, which are in turn associated with adherence to Islam. The institutional discourse condenses and reifies an official account of community identity, depicting Muslims as a group incorporated in national contexts that, at the same time, keeps its religious customs intact, passing them down from one generation to the next, precisely thanks to the existence of such institutions. In this context, Islam is passed on as a dimension inherent in Arabic culture, that is, as an ethnicised religion.

Immigrant community leaders, playing the role of cultural entrepreneurs, chose to create institutions aimed at transmitting religious and cultural values. This project had a 'preservation-oriented' character, since one of its driving forces was the fear that younger generations might completely assimilate into the local culture, becoming indistinguishable from Brazilians or Paraguayans. As spaces intended for cultural reproduction, schools and institutions were established for the purpose of enabling the survival of a culture of origin among the descendants born into the host society. However, as in any immigrant community, the cultural preservation project is altered by generational changes.

The pioneers' discourse has common characteristics, given the context of migration processes, and is virtually a narrative *genre*. In the border space, it appears as the account of arrival in an until then inhospitable area, a description of the process of gradual economic rise and

involvement in forms of political participation at the local level. In this discourse, there appear many names of founding families as well as references to the networks of family members and relatives who facilitated migration. Such accounts establish milestones concerning the creation of institutions (centres, mosques, and schools). The pioneers' discourse is similar to the institutional discourse mentioned above, perhaps because many of them play the role of ethno-political and religious entrepreneurs and are used to presenting the Islamic community to the local societies. Pioneers lead most religious institutions and were very often their founders.

The pioneers' narratives are intermingled with the account of the role they played in the economic configuration of this region, explaining that upon arrival it was an area of emerging commercial development. Many of the respondents explained their arrival and stay as them having the 'right vision of the region's future', which was later confirmed, and because of pre-existing migration networks that made it possible to arrive in this then inhospitable region, where they had at least some relative who had mentioned the possibility to immigrate. Some of these narrated stories emphasise the shift from unstable activities in the 1960s to the stable activities of the prosperous present, from huckster to owner of one or more shops. Here, the descriptions of arrival are filled with references to the urban landscape of the 1960s. In Foz do Iguaçu, dirt roads and a few shops in what is now one of the major commercial avenues; in Ciudad del Este, the building of the first shopping arcades by pioneers from the Arab community.

Farid, one of the pioneers from Palestine, considered the beginning of the migration flow after the 1950s as connected with a genuine possibility: "Before, there were no chances of making money here; that started in 1950s Brazil" (Personal interview, November 2013).[12] In the 1960s, Farid entered Brazil via Uruguay from Argentina, holding a Jordanian passport. He had obtained a visa for the latter, where he stayed for 48 hours; he spent one and a half years in Rio Grande do Sul before he moved to Foz. A cousin of his was already in the border region:

> When I first arrived, I saw new things, but it was not easy. I would listen what the situation was like, you had to work really hard. I started off as a huckster; I would carry two suitcases and go to the countryside in Rio Grande do Sul, I would stay there for a week selling goods [...]. I learnt that in the frontier there were more work chances, I came here and opened a shop in the city centre and later another one in another neighbourhood, my cousin [opened] one in Ciudad del Este... I set up business at Brasil avenue, it was not paved, houses were all made of wood; when it rained there was mud all over the place.[13]

A daughter to pioneering immigrants told her father's story: he had arrived from the Bekaa valley in 1953, first settling in São Paulo and later in Ciudad del Este. Although her parents' wish was to return to Lebanon, the outbreak of war in

1975 determined their stay in the frontier region. Between 1979 and 1980, the family moved to the Brazilian side, to Foz do Iguaçu. In this discourse, there emerges a family memory which juxtaposes three spaces that this interviewee mentioned in national terms—Lebanon, Paraguay, and Brazil, a combination which does not make it possible to determine the extent to which each of these locations shaped her family's identity. Descendants of the small group of pioneers, who were born in Brazil or Paraguay, had no local institutions where they could obtain formal education in Arabic. At that time, schools and religious centres for the community were merely an idea, so some of them were sent to Lebanon to spend some periods of time there at school or living with relatives. The immigrants of the 1980s also used to send their children to their homelands, but, as there were already local educational spaces, these trips were planned for the purpose of reinforcing the learning of Arabic or as a cultural immersion experience in the family's homeland.

The occupational *niche* of Arab immigrants is predominantly in trade—retail, wholesale, and import, the line of Ciudad del Este–Foz de Iguaçu being the hub of these business activities. The spectrum ranges from small shops in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este, such as modest supermarkets, fast food shops, and shops selling textiles, to chain stores, shops selling electrical appliances and computer supplies, and shopping malls and arcades in Ciudad del Este. Although many of the merchants have attained important positions, others work as assistants in their relatives' shops, buy and sell items in both cities or change occupations according to short-term opportunities. The commercial dimension plays a key role in the dynamics of the Triple Frontier, as shown in the careers of Arab Muslim immigrants and their descendants. The idea of being immersed in an occupation that leaves scarce time for community life is recurrent in the way many described their daily activities.

The narrative of more recent immigrants: religious ascription and cultural boundaries—between dissolution and expansion

The distinction between pioneers and more recent immigrants often occurs in informants' discourse in the categories of 'older' (a few people) and 'newer', with descendants usually being called 'the young'. In the discourse of the immigrants of the 1980s, we find some undertones and differences in comparison with that of the pioneers. The members of this group are characterised by more discontinued backgrounds, regarding both their economic positions and their religious practice. In this group, we find accounts of temporary withdrawal from religious practice, expressions disputing the representativeness of local institutional leaders, and feelings of 'sitting on the fence'. In many cases, there is the idea of belonging to an 'economic community' (as some of the informants called it).

Two immigrants of the 1980s, who were involved in the creation of Arab schools, had reached similar conclusions on the predominance of working and economic life among the Arab immigrant community. At the school located on the Paraguayan side of the border, in Ciudad del Este, Said stated that Muslims made up an 'economic community'. From his viewpoint, like the other immigrants in the area, Arab Muslims arrived there to work and establish 'market relations' with others. This informant argued that it is commercial activity that sets the pace of immigrants' lives and, for this reason, he thinks that only few people actually have the time and willingness for religious practice. (Personal interview, January 2014) On the other side of the border, in Foz do Iguaçu, another immigrant, who had arrived in 1986 and works in one of the Arab schools in the city, complained about the members of his own community, claiming that the prevalence of economic interests was weakening group unity: "Let's not deceive ourselves—what matters here is the economy; it is hard to get someone to help the school or to devote time to these projects." (Personal interview, February 2014) Actually, narratives of work and the search for opportunities for a better life play an important role in the way immigrants tell their experiences at the border. In general, the region is associated with the idea of opportunity and economic promise. The time of greater commercial boom between Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguaçu lasted until the late 1990s, enabling some prosperity which most immigrants still enjoy. Meanwhile, in the immigrants' narratives, the grounds for migration consistently refer to the chance of improving living conditions. Inflation, low-pay or dead-end jobs in the homeland were placed above other motives. Destination places, Brazil or Paraguay, were mentioned as being casual, coincidental, hardly planned or anticipated choices, because 'there is work in the frontier' and 'there is Arab trade, which makes things easier'. Many of these immigrants explain their mobility and stay in the place, as well as the membership in a community, by aspects that placed the working world over other factors, such as 'the Arabs' ability to advance where conditions are given' and the 'skill to shift from agriculture to trade'. As one of the respondents stated: "We can practise our religion anywhere in the world, even at home, but only in few places can you work and move forward." (Personal interview, February 2014)

The opportunities offered by the border explained the choice to stay in a destination place which is dominated by economic ups and downs, but on which expectations seemed to be laid, since the border area weighed much more, considering its potentialities, than its short-term scenarios. Therefore, many people find in the narrative of economic integration the border as a land of promise and progress and work as a way of understanding and expressing their individual trajectories.

However, by identifying themselves as Muslims in the context of the cultural diversity of the border, they build cultural boundaries in relation to local lifestyles, with these boundaries being characterised as either insurmountable or potentially porous. The distinction I could establish in this field of discourses is between a more pessimistic forecast—that the Muslim community will become extinct in the future—and a more optimistic outlook—that the moral values of Islam will end up strongly influencing a local society which is seen as degraded and devoid of values. At the narrative core, with emphasis on the idea of dissolution, local lifestyles appear as a threat to the community's younger generations and the cultural diversity of the border itself is seen as hindering the preservation of religion. Islam is presented as ethnicised; thus the possibility of conversion among Brazilians and Paraguayans is not considered, since they are deemed to bear strongly different religious and cultural traditions. The future of Islam seems connected with the idea of the need to keep a certain social distance from the local context.

A number of narratives emphasised distinctions between customs and habits deemed to be specific to the community, based on religious adherence to Islam, and customs and habits considered characteristic of Brazil or Paraguay. This comparison of 'lifestyles' made the actors define themselves among multiple options, along a spectrum of habits and inclinations involving a certain unity, whose selection or creation is influenced by expectations of the 'community of belonging', by the visibility of role models as well as by situational circumstances (Giddens 1991, 75–80). In this sense, many immigrants expressed concern about the possibility that their children may alienate themselves from their 'religious and cultural roots'. Accordingly, local lifestyles were defined as 'alluring', 'attractive', 'easy to follow and take up'. Very often I noticed that this idea was associated with the conceptualisation of the local society as integrative and non-discriminatory towards Arabs and Muslims. A religious leader of the Shiite community interpreted Brazilian society as too "overwhelming"; therefore, it was just natural that it should eventually make one indifferent towards the culture of origin. On the other hand, according to him, Muslims in Europe face a type of society that is "racist and discriminatory" and the effect of this is greater preservation of the culture by immigrants. (Personal interview, December 2013)

Other accounts considered local influence and likely deviation from religious tenets as a temporary stage that the young may go through, an experience that would eventually be left behind and end with the recovery of community ties. Jamil, for example, told me that he would rather let his children experience themselves what was good for them, that they would eventually realise what they must do. For instance, he said that his son had had the experience of dating a Brazilian girl and

that over time he had himself verified the difficulties he could face if he continued with that relationship, because of cultural differences. (Personal interview, March 2014) Stories of estrangements and difficulties concerning mixed marriages are part of the repertoire of those whose discourse is characterised by the fear of cultural dilution. Moreover, within this group of immigrants who are more interested in preserving traditions, we find discourses on the difficulties that Arab schools must face in educating children exposed to strong influences from the local culture, through the mass media, friends, and interactions with the host society. This set of narratives, which we could call 'narratives of dilution', account for the tensions generated by the production of imaginaries referring to a dual localisation pattern (Tambiah 2000, 169), where different forms of socialisation related to the differences between homeland and host spaces are set in contrast.

Among the pioneers and the immigrants of the 1980s we also find an idea that, instead of stressing the possibility of dissolution, emphasises the influence that Islam might have on the local societies in the future. In these discourses, the relationship between religion and ethnicity is built differently. Religious identification will survive the identity of origin and the values attached to Islam will end up influencing the Paraguayan and Brazilian societies, which will ultimately understand the Muslim way of life.

Salim, for example, arrived in 1987 and lives on the Brazilian side of the border, but had already lived on the Paraguayan side for some years. He considers the Tri-Border Area one of the safest places in the world and sees the "Arab people" as a "spiritual people". Based on the experience of his interactions with the local population, both in the working world and in the sociable spaces in which he has engaged in both cities over time, he trusts that, in the future, Islam will influence and transform local customs. Far from fearing dilution, Salim believes that local customs, at first sight opposed to the Muslim community's religious practices, are only subordinate issues. He thinks that dressing differently—in the case of Muslim women, not drinking alcohol, not eating pork, and other characteristics that may seem "exotic" today will stop being seen that way, stop being considered "alien" by local societies. His statement on eating habits illustrates this point of view: "The habits that Muslims associate with religious tenets can be taken up by Paraguayans and Brazilians, since these are healthy habits that improve the quality of life." (Personal interview, March 2014)

Other informants, defining themselves as Muslims, claimed that exemplary practices by community members might serve to convey the spirituality of Islam to Brazilians and Paraguayans. In such discourses, the ways of life associated with the practice of Islam would not be 'adapted' or 'assimilated' into local ways of life; rather, they would

eventually permeate them through contributions. In these narratives, comparisons were always based on equivalences rather than on contrasts. As Jaber emphasised, speaking in his Foz do Iguaçu shop: "What really matters in life is that which is general, also because we will influence people who have no religion, we have nothing against them." (Personal interview, April 2014) Even more excited about the idea that Islam will have even greater visibility in the future, Rashid, a Lebanese who has lived in Foz do Iguaçu for 15 years after spending some years in Ciudad del Este, said: "In the future this region may become a little Malaysia, attracting Muslims from all over the world, and this predominance will spread the customs that will then stop being seen as alien." (Personal interview, April 2014)

These discourses are anchored in the construction of continuities with local societies and, simultaneously, in the construction of symbolic boundaries with the other immigrant communities, which may lack the cohesion of a religion capable of influencing the local culture. The effort to learn local languages—Portuguese and Spanish—is also part of narratives seeking to show the readiness of Arab Muslims to 'integrate' in the space of residence. Often, the opposite example refers to other communities, such as the Chinese, who are criticised because 'they speak no other language but their own', unlike Arab Muslims, among whom 'there are few who do not speak Spanish or Portuguese'.

Bashir, who works in Ciudad del Este during the day and helps in a shop selling *shawarma* and other fast food in Foz do Iguaçu in the evening, enthusiastically recalled the case of a Brazilian employee who, "after serving Arab customers for so long", had learnt the language and even attended the mosque with them, stressing the likelihood of such cases being repeated in the future. (Personal interview, May 2014) Some immigrants stated that, in the future, Arab schools might eventually open up to the Brazilian and Paraguayan societies, which would finally acknowledge 'the type of education and spiritual values provided there'. The prospect of widespread recognition of the values conveyed by the Muslim religion makes some immigrants imagine that, in the future, the educational institutions founded by the community will prove attractive to society as a whole. While, so far, at the Arab School in Foz do Iguaçu, for instance, very few Brazilian pupils are not of Arab descent, some imagine that society will end up recognizing that it is 'one of the few educational spaces conveying values and customs that are no longer taught elsewhere'.

The discourses of dilution and expansion or influences represent two sides of the same coin, two different ways of considering the possibility of mutual influences between a culture and lifestyle seen as being 'of origin' and a culture and lifestyle attributed to the host society. In the representations included in the narratives analysed here, the direction whereby the local culture influences

the cultures of origin seems to be seen as a potential dilution; the opposite direction considers the possibility of Islamic culture contributing to local lifestyles.[14]

Descendants

Born on the Paraguayan or Brazilian side of the border, the descendants of the immigrants of the 1980s constitute the largest group.[15] Most of them are under 30 years old, with many having been educated at community schools, although the older ones also attended other schools or experienced double schooling, since the educational establishments founded by their ancestors had just opened. Among these young people, many of whom have travelled to their parents' or grandparents' mother countries, either for holidays or to learn Arabic, there were two well-defined groups. In some cases, such trips had helped them appreciate life in Brazil or Paraguay: they argued that, as visitors in those places, they had 'suffered the adjustment to customs' and found lifestyles to be dramatically different.[16] For others, the trips had reaffirmed their roots and brought them closer to the community, after they had the chance to 'know at first hand' daily life in the culture of origin.

Thus, strategies used for educating the younger generations do not always have the effect of perpetuating the culture of origin when blended with the choices made later during each individual's trajectory. As in any group of immigrants, here, the existence of Arab schools and religious centres does not lead to homogeneous cultural reproduction; rather, the results vary according to individual trajectories and to the forms of self-reflexivity constructed around these experiences. The older generations lay expectations and the imaginaries about the community's future on the descendants. During fieldwork, I saw that some had 'detached' themselves from the ethnic and religious role models of the culture of origin, whereas most remained in the religious spaces. Early generations would set cultural boundaries, separating themselves from the Paraguayan and Brazilian societies. Such boundaries were either deemed as insurmountable or surmountable, but were always clear. Among the youth, we can identify a shift away from these cultural boundaries, since their experiences of interaction very often lead them to differentiate themselves much more inside than outside their communities. Descendants have a higher level of education than their parents, usually mastering three languages: Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese. Although their biographies include the experience of having spent some time in Lebanon, visiting family or learning Arabic, they also strongly interact with local youth (for relationships related to work, love, and leisure time). Descendants' life trajectories are inscribed in individuation processes where the assertion of cultural and religious adherence generates rationalised arguments which

distinguish legacy from choice. The young people I met territorialise Islam differently, insisting that *shaykhs* and institutional leaders should use local languages for religious teaching and admit converts in the future. They engage in *Da'wah* activities (spreading Islam), while previous generations were mainly intent on preserving the community of origin. New associations and youth groups are created inside and outside religious institutions and the construction of identity role models seems to be more connected with religious adherence than with ethnic affiliation of the culture of origin. In the universe of the young people, we find many in-between narratives, discourses on being 'Arabs' and at the same time being Brazilians or Paraguayans. Generally, in young people's narratives, religious adherence does not emerge as a mandatory cultural legacy but as an individual, active choice.

Conclusion

The narratives showing the experience of living in the border area as Arab immigrants and as Muslims differ according to whether residents are pioneers, more recent immigrants or descendants. While the pioneers considered their integration in terms of building the commercial vitality of the region, the more recent immigrants highlighted the work promises and opportunities in the border region, with its short-term scenarios and ups and downs. These identifications allowed them to think of themselves in a similar position to the other migrant groups—e.g. the Chinese and Koreans—and to internal migrants since they were all there in order to 'work and move forward' and occupied various occupational *niches* within the market hierarchy. At the same time, the discourse of the pioneers and the immigrants of the 1980s referred to processes of categorical identification, whereby they identified themselves as members of a Muslim community, that is, as sharing a number of categorical attributes that make them part of an identity ascription. These identifications were expressed in a deeply dialogical interplay with local lifestyles, seen as both potentially diluting identity and religion of origin and likely to be influenced by the culture of Islam. Identity constructions by the Muslims in the Triple Frontier should not be thought of in terms of the equation of relationships between society of origin and host society, but in terms of localisation processes in more than one space. These processes are, at the same time, influenced by cross-border circulation and by the confluence of cross-representations generated at the intersection of the respective countries in the Tri-Border Area. I have found that the categories used by Arab Muslims to make sense of their experience had a deeply contextual character. Pioneers and more recent immigrants, taken as members of an economic community or as individuals engrossed in working life, thought of the space beyond the boundaries of their groups of origin and 'equated' themselves with all

immigrants living in the border region because of their economic dynamics. However, the same individuals, in pondering and imagining the future of their community in that space, emphasised their religious ascription as a specificity of origin, which could either fade or remain strong and thereby influence local culture. Some descendants considered their religious belonging not as given but as chosen. The Muslims in the Triple Frontier combine various expressions of a sense of community that could not be described in substantive terms but should rather be considered in terms of the possible paths followed by collective identities in a context of diaspora and transnationalism. Following Steven Vertovec (2003, 2009), one could claim that, while previous generations have adopted an 'ethnic-religious option' aimed at perpetuating a national and regional mode of their religion as an internal dimension within cultural and social practices, subsequent generations seem to embrace a 'religious option', where identification processes tend to become autonomous from the culture of origin.

Notes

1. For an overview of Muslim communities in the Triple Frontier, see Pinto (2011).
2. Currently, Ciudad del Este, on the Paraguayan side, is the city with the largest number of inhabitants—312,652 people, based on data from the Alto Paraná Government. On the Brazilian side, Foz do Iguaçu has a population of 263,508 inhabitants, according to estimates by the *Instituto Brasileiro Geográfico e Estatístico* of 2013. The Argentine city of Puerto Iguazú counts only 82,227 inhabitants, based on the 2010 census undertaken by the National Institute of Statistics and Census of Argentina.
3. On the economic, cultural, and social dynamics of the Triple Frontier, see Giménez Béliveau and Montenegro (2010).
4. It is worth noting that Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay had a previous Arab immigration, in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, within which Muslims were a minority. For a study of Arab migrations to Latin America, see Akmir (2009). For an analysis of the Muslim presence in Brazil, see Montenegro and Benlabbah (2013).
5. The civil war (1975–1990) and the occupation of territories in South Lebanon by Israel (1982–2000) were determining factors for these migrations.
6. Here are some characteristics of the region as a transnational space: a) it comprises recently emerged urban centres which have unevenly but rapidly grown over the past 40 years; b) it is a key geo-political space in the Mercosur (the South American trade bloc established in 1991 by the Treaty of Asunción) and also an area which is particularly rich in natural, water, and energy resources; c) because of its geographical location, commercial activity, and convenient infrastructure of bridges and roads, it proves a necessary trading route for the three countries; d) the commercial hub, represented by Ciudad del Este, is the centre of the region's economy; e) a significant aspect is cultural diversity, praised by local governments as an example of harmonious coexistence and plurality.

7. On gender and Islam in Brazil, see Campos Ferreira (2010).
8. Between 1995 and 2005, over 400 news stories were published about the Triple Frontier in US and Argentine newspapers, e.g. "Jungle Hub for World's Outlaws" (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 1998: 10), "Terror Cell on Rise in South America" (*The Washington Times*, 18 December 2002: 6), "Al Qaeda South" (*The Washington Times*, 23 August 2002: 11), "The Terror Threat in the Southern Cone" (*The Washington Times*, 16 August 2004: 18), "Focus on Terror Funding" (*The Washington Times*, 23 August 2004: 18), "Teams to Target Financial Crimes: Lawless Region Feeds Terrorism" (*The Washington Times*, 24 March 2006: 13), "Tri-Border Organized Crime Stirs Concern: Money Laundering by Arab Groups Suspected" (*The Washington Times*, 25 April 2006: 12).
9. This had practical effects: some immigrants and institutions were the target of extortion and persecution.
10. Regarding the social imaginaries of the Triple Frontier, see Araujo Pereia (2014).
11. Palestinian immigrants and their descendants—comprising around 40 families—belong to the Sunni branch of Islam; they live on the Brazilian side and attend the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab mosque. There is also a Druzian Home in the city of Foz do Iguaçu, which brings together a small group of Lebanese Druzians. Some Druzians converted to Christianity, since Baptists established the Arab Evangelical Church over a decade ago (on this Baptist Church's institution and its missionary project, see Montenegro 2011). Bangladeshis have their own prayer room on the Paraguayan side and gather around a *shaykh* of their own nationality.
12. The informants' names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.
13. Interview extracts are translated by the author from Portuguese.
14. For a study on Catholic and Pentecostal representations of Islam and Muslims at the Brazil–Paraguay border, see Giménez Béliveau, Montenegro, and Setton (2009).
15. A more detailed description of this group is provided by Montenegro (2013).
16. Accounts of travel and family relationships during such visits appeared constructed on the basis of anecdotes about mistakes made in daily life, differences in eating habits, and in gender relationships, contrasted with the way of life in Brazil or Paraguay.

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No potential conflict of interest is reported by the author.

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