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THE RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS OF SYRIAN-LEBANESE AND PALESTINIAN COMMUNITIES IN BRAZIL

Abstract
This article analyzes the role of religious identities in the constitution and negotiation of the cultural differences and social position of the Arabic-speaking immigrants in Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century. Religious identity was an important form of social classification for both the immigrants and the Brazilian society. Among the immigrants, affiliation to one of the many religious communities present in the Middle East provided access to institutions and networks of solidarity within the larger group of Arabic-speaking immigrants in Brazil. Conversely, conversion to Catholicism was an important element in the process of cultural integration that was expected to accompany upwards social mobility in the Brazilian society. Religious imaginaries and religious identities were intertwined with the ethnic and national identities that the Arabic-speaking immigrants mobilized in order to build a community and negotiate their presence in the Brazilian society. Therefore, this analysis will focus on in the role of religious traditions and institutions in the ways through which Arab, Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian ethnicity have been negotiated, transmitted and reinvented in Brazil.

Brazil was a major destination for Arabic-speaking immigrants from the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,[1] having received 162,355 of them between 1871 and 2001.[2] These immigrants and their descendants constitute a large community that is associated with economic entrepreneurship, upward social mobility and successful social integration. While the recent studies about the Arabic-speaking immigrants and their descendants in Brazil take into account the different cultural perceptions and social pressures faced by Christians and Muslims,[3] there is still no detailed analysis of the role of religion in the constitution and negotiation of the cultural differences and social position of the Arabic-speaking immigrants in Brazil.

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Religious identity was an important form of social classification for both the immigrants and the Brazilian society. Among the immigrants, affiliation to one of the many religious communities present in the Middle East provided access to institutions and networks of solidarity within the larger group of Arabic-speakers in Brazil. Conversely, conversion to Catholicism was an important element in the process of cultural integration that was expected to accompany upwards social mobility in the Brazilian society of the first half of the twentieth century.

Religious imaginaries and religious identities were intertwined with the ethnic and national identities that the Arabic-speaking immigrants mobilized in order to build a community and negotiate their presence in the Brazilian society. Religious practices, such as pilgrimage, and devotion to saints and holy places also were part of the processes that created transnational connections between the Arabic-speaking communities in Brazil and the Middle East. Therefore, this analysis will focus on in the role of religious traditions and institutions in the ways through which Arab, Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian ethnicity have been negotiated, transmitted and reinvented in Brazil since the nineteenth century.

The Arabic-speaking immigrants to Brazil came mainly from the regions of the Ottoman Empire which became Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. While this immigration continued throughout the twentieth century, and continues today, the number of immigrants dropped drastically after the Brazilian government adopted a system of quotas in its 1934 constitution limiting the entrance of immigrants to 2 percent of the number of previous entrances of each nationality.[4] The majority of the immigrants consisted of Christians, with smaller number of Muslims and Jews. It is accepted by most scholars that the Maronites were the largest group, with the Orthodox and Melkites coming next, and that there was a minority of Muslims, composed of Sunnis, 'Alawis, Druze and Shi'is, and a small number of Arabic-speaking Jews.[5]

Despite the importance of religious affiliation in the trajectory of the immigrants from the Middle East, there is no possibility of knowing the exact numbers or to get reliable estimates on the religious composition of the immigrants. The only official classification of the religion of the immigrants coming into Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century was as "Catholics," which included Maronites, Melkites and Roman Catholics, and "non-Catholics," which lumped together Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews. The official statistics

only tell us that, between 1908 and 1941, 55 percent of the "Turkish-Arab" (*Turco-Árabes*) immigrants were Catholics and 45 percent were non-Catholics, with the religious diversity that is contained in each one of these categories being accessible through rough estimates.[6]

Notwithstanding the religious and social diversity of the Arabic-speaking immigrants the Brazilians classified them as "Turks" (*Turcos*), for the first immigrants carried passports of the Ottoman Empire, which was known as the Turkish Empire. Until 1892 all immigrants from the Middle East were classified by the Brazilian authorities as "Turks", with "Turkish-Arabs" (*Turco-Árabes*) and "Turkish-Asians" (*Turco-Asiáticos*) also appearing in the official documents. After this date, the term "Syrian" (*Sírio*) started to be used to identify all immigrants from the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The term "Lebanese" (*Libanês*) only started to be used in 1926, date of creation of Lebanon as a state under the French Mandate. All these categories were applied to the Arabic-speaking immigrants until the 1940s, when there is a sharp decline in the use of "Turk," "Turkish-Arab," and "Turkish-Asiatic."[7]

After 1920 the hyphenated identity of "Syrian-Lebanese"[8] gradually became the term of generic identification of the Arabic-speaking immigrants and their descendants in Brazil. This term was already incorporated by the Brazilian official discourse about the Arabic-speaking community in 1923, when it appeared for the first time in the special issue of the *Monitor Mercantil* dedicated to the Syrian-Lebanese commerce.[9] This general identification of the community did not replace the other ethnic and national identities, such as Arab, Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian, which remained the main source of self-identification of its members, as well as continued to be fostered by many of its institutions.

A central element in the stabilization of the idea of a Syrian-Lebanese community was the constitution of a shared narrative about its history and insertion in the Brazilian society. This process was dominated by Lebanese Christian intellectuals graduated from the American University of Beirut. Taufik Duoun and Taufik Kurban elaborated important historical accounts of the "Syrian-Lebanese" or "Syrian and Lebanese" immigration to Brazil.[10] These authors helped to create a "master narrative" with mythical characteristics that structured the way of thinking and understanding the creation and social dynamics of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Brazil in both academic and non-academic texts.

The narrative starts with Christian Arabs being forced to leave their homelands in the Middle East because of political oppression, economic mismanagement and religious persecution done by the Ottomans; it continues with the hardships of their early life in Brazil as peddlers and concludes with their economic success and integration in the Brazilian society. The mythical aspect of this narrative comes from its capacity of generalize to all immigrants a trajectory that was connected to particular cases in order to create a sense of cohesion and common origin to a group religiously, socially, and culturally heterogeneous as that of the Arab-speaking immigrants in Brazil. It also suppressed from the official collective memory the histories racism and discrimination suffered by many immigrants, as they disturbed the idealized narrative of perfect integration and assimilation into the Brazilian society.

This mythical narrative is interesting not only because it imposed itself as the main form of self-representation of the community, but also for its transnational dimension with the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora in the Americas. Similar narratives were elaborated by the Syrian-Lebanese or Lebanese communities in other countries of Latin-America. A key element in the transnational dimension of this narrative was the fact that the intellectual elite in these communities usually was composed by graduates from the American University of Beirut. These intellectuals not only shared similar worldviews and ideals, but also were connected in networks organized around the figure of Philip Hitti, an ex-professor of the AUB who became professor in Princeton, and institutions such as the Association of Alumni of the American University of Beirut which was created in 1922 in São Paulo.[11]

Therefore, the Arabic-speaking immigrants claimed various ethnic and national identities for themselves, such as "Arabs," "Syrians," "Lebanese," "Palestinians," and "Syrian-Lebanese." While these identities were shared by most sectors of the community, there was never a consensus over their meaning, or which relation they had among themselves. This allowed a multiplicity of identities to be constantly available to the members of the community, even if one or more of them became dominant during certain periods. The acceptance or rejection of these identities also was unevenly distributed among the various religious groups, with the Maronites being less enthusiastic about the "Arab" identity, which was usually embraced by the Orthodox Christians, 'Alawis, and Sunni Muslims.

The boundaries between the various religious groups within the larger Arabic-speaking community in Brazil were constantly reaffirmed by the visit of religious authorities from the Middle east. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century the religious life of the Christian Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian immigrants was organized by the visits of religious authorities of the Orthodox, Maronite, and Melkite Churches. These visits were the occasions in which the immigrants would communicate publicly their religious identities and create a sense of community with the fellow members of one of the three Middle Eastern Christian confessions. The first Middle Eastern ecclesiastical dignitary to visit Brazil was D. Basílio Hajjar, archbishop of Tyr and Dayr al-Qamar, who arrived in Rio in 1874 and was received by the Brazilian Emperor, D. Pedro II.[12] Visits of Melkite, Maronite, and Orthodox authorities followed regularly well into the twentieth century, creating the basis onto which the religious institutions of the Middle Eastern immigrants were built.

Among the first religious institutions of the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinians immigrants in Brazil there were those linked to the Orthodox Church. As the Orthodox could not count with the Catholic Church, the dominant Christian confession in Brazil, for their religious and social needs, they started to organize their own institutions. In 1897 the Saint Nicholas Orthodox Society (*Sociedade Ortodoxa São Nicolau*) was founded in Rio de Janeiro—then, the capital of Brazil—which aimed to provide the Orthodox believers with charity and services, as well as with a space for the celebration of religious rituals. Also in 1897 the Orthodox community in São Paulo created the Saint Paul Orthodox Society (*Sociedade Ortodoxa São Paulo*).[13]

The creation of the Orthodox societies allowed the members of the Anthiochene Orthodox Church to communicate their religious difference in the religious landscape of Brazil. It also organized them in a religious community connected to the ethnic institutions that constituted the emerging Syrian-Lebanese community. The process of affirmation of the Orthodox religious identity in the diasporic context of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Brazil was completed by the construction of the Nativity church (*Igreja da Natividade*) in São Paulo in 1904, and of the Saint Nicholas church (*Igreja de São Nicolau*) in Rio de Janeiro, which was inaugurated in 1918 as the Orthodox cathedral of Brazil.

The Maronite and Melkite Church also faced difficulties to affirm their ritual and institutional identity in the Brazilian religious

landscape, for they were submitted to the Brazilian Catholic hierarchy, which allowed them to celebrate mass in some churches but was not very eager to allow autonomous institutions to develop. Notwithstanding, the Maronite community in São Paulo, due its size and prosperity, created the Maronite Charitable Society (*Sociedade Maronita de Beneficência*) in 1897 and built a Maronite church in 1903.

In Rio the Janeiro, where the Catholic Church had its siege in Brazil, the process took longer. In 1901 a Maronite Brotherhood (*al-Akhwiyya al-Maruniyya*) was created in Rio de Janeiro, in order to celebrate masses and provide spiritual assistance to the Maronites in this city.[14] Despite the plans of the brotherhood to build a Maronite church, this only would happen decades later. In 1931, Maronite priests coming from Buenos Aires created, in Rio de Janeiro, the Lebanese Maronite Mission. The Mission built the church of Our Lady of Lebanon (*Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Líbano*) in 1936. After being destroyed by fire in 1950, the church was rebuilt in a larger scale and inaugurated in 1960. The Melkites only created their first religious organization in 1928 with the foundation of the Greek-Catholic Melkite Council (*Conselho Grego-Católico Melquita*) in Rio de Janeiro, which aimed to build a church to the community. The Saint Basil church was built between 1938 and 1941, granting to the Melkite Church greater autonomy from the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Despite the difficulties in their organization in Brazil, all the three Churches managed to establish Episcopal sees in Rio de Janeiro. In 1922 the first Orthodox bishop, Mikhail Chehade, came from Syria.[15] In 1951 the Bishopric of the Catholics of Oriental Rite in Brazil (*Ordinariato dos Católicos de Rito Oriental no Brasil*) was created, and Monseigneur Elias Coueter was indicated to the Melkite Church, and Elias Ghoreyeb to the Maronite Church,[16] being confirmed as bishop by the Maronite Church in Lebanon in 1952.[17]

The first Islamic organizations created by Middle Eastern immigrants only appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. This delay in relation to their Christian counterparts is partly due to the negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims that circulated in the Brazilian society. In the context the public affirmation of Muslim identity was seen as something that could hinder the social integration and mobility of the immigrants and their descendants. Only when there was already a well-established Syrian-Lebanese community endowed with several institutions that the first Islamic institutions were created.

In 1929 the Muslim Charitable Society (*Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana*) was created in São Paulo.[18] While this association had a clear Sunni identity, it aimed to be the main religious reference to all Muslims in Brazil. Many Islamic rituals, such as the Friday prayers, the feast of sacrifice (*'Eid al-Adha*) and the feast that marks the end of the period of fasting in Ramadan (*'Eid al-Fitr*), were performed at the main hall of the Society until the construction of a mosque associated with it. The Brazil Mosque (*Mesquita Brasil*), the first one in the country, was built between 1942 and 1960 with donations from the Egyptian government. Since 1950 the rituals of the community were performed in its premises.

However, Druzes and 'Alawis, who did not identify with the Sunni tradition fostered by the Muslim Charitable Society of São Paulo, created their own institutions in other provinces of Brazil. Already in 1929 the Druze Charitable Society (*Sociedade Beneficente Druziense*) was created in Oliveira, in Minas Gerais. In 1956 it was transferred to Belo Horizonte, the capital city of the province. In 1931 the 'Alawi community in Rio de Janeiro created the 'Alawi Muslim Charitable Society (*Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana Alauíta*). This society became the main religious institution to all Muslims in the city until the 1950s when the Sunnis create their own association.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the growth of the Muslim community in Brazil, due to continuing immigration, led to the creation of other Muslim Charitable Societies. The Sunni Muslims in Rio de Janeiro created the Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro (*Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana do Rio de Janeiro*) in 1951. In 1957 the Muslim community in Curitiba, which was constituted by both Sunnis and Shi'is, created the Muslim Charitable Society of Paraná (*Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana do Paraná*). In 1969 the Druze Brazilian Home (*Lar Druzo Brasileiro*) was created in São Paulo.

The religious life of the Muslim communities in Brazil was also centered in the Muslim Charitable Societies, as the building of mosques would become a generalized phenomenon only in the 1980s. While Friday prayers were performed in the societies and the two feasts (*'Eid al-Fitr* and *'Eid al-Adha*) often celebrated, Islam was lived and transmitted as a set of beliefs, rituals, and moral rules embedded in a cultural tradition expressed in Arabic and identified with the Middle Eastern "homeland" of the immigrants. In some cases formal religious activities were even absent, as shows the example of the Muslim Charitable Association of Rio de Janeiro, where prayers only started to be performed in 1970. Therefore, the Muslim associations and

institutions aimed to transmit Brazil the cultural traditions of the Middle Eastern immigrants in order to keep the new generations born in Brazil connected to what was understood as the basis of their Muslim identity.

The Christian and Muslim associations functioned as spaces where the community gathered for both religious and social activities. They served as arenas of socialization of the younger generations born in Brazil into the Middle Eastern cultural traditions of the immigrants and the transmission of the Arabic language through the social interaction between families. They also provided an institutional space for forging friendships and matrimonial arrangements between the families and individuals of the religious community. The construction of temples (churches, mosques, prayer-halls) gave a greater visibility to the ritual and doctrinal dimension in the community life of the religious institutions. Rituals and religious feasts were arenas of mobilization and communication of both the religious and ethnic-national identities of the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian immigrants and their descendants, allowing them to constitute a moral community.

The religious rituals also allowed the communication of cultural differences that demarcated the ethnic boundaries[19] of the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian communities in relation to the larger Brazilian society. Arabic was the main symbol of ethnic identity that was expressed in the ritual communication of the religious communities created by the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian immigrants in Brazil. All rituals, Christian or Muslim, used Arabic as their main linguistic context, even if it was accompanied by some passages in Greek or Aramaic in the Christian Churches. Even when a bill from the Patriarch of Antioch allowed Portuguese to be adopted as the main liturgical language of the Anthiochene Orthodox Church in Brazil, in 1938, many passages were left in Arabic, allowing the communication of religious and ethnic difference.[20]

Therefore, Arabic was the main cultural element that served as "common denominator"[21] or creating a sense of community that was shared by Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinian immigrants beyond their religious differences. Nevertheless, cultural differences were also communicated in the ritual, affirming the specificity of each religious tradition within the community. While the use of Arabic in the Orthodox ritual located the Orthodox community within the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian community, the use of the Julian calendar for Christmas and Easter individualized the Orthodox Church in

relation to the other Christian traditions of these communities, which followed the Gregorian calendar adopted by the Catholic Church.

There were also forms of cultural communication with the larger Brazilian society that were developed and expressed in the rituals of the religious groups of Middle Eastern origin. The Orthodox Church in Rio de Janeiro offers in its Christmas mass a good example of how shared symbols, albeit with discrete meanings, are mobilized in order to create a cultural idiom for the articulation of the religious identity with the local cultural milieu.

During the mass in the Saint Nicholas church a member of the community appeared dressed as Santa Claus, who is a re-elaboration of the figure of Saint Nicholas himself, and took communion. The "communion of Santa Claus" was a well-established Christmas tradition in Rio de Janeiro, and many non-Orthodox visitors went to Saint Nicholas church, often with their kids, in order to see it. Thus, the Brazilian imaginary of Christmas, which is centered in the commercial figure of Santa Claus, was articulated with the Orthodox veneration of Saint Nicholas, inscribing a devotional element of the Orthodox religiosity in the cultural landscape of Rio de Janeiro.

The religious institutions sometimes express religious imaginaries and forms of solidarity that go beyond the boundaries of the Arabic-speaking community. The Saint Nicholas church in Rio de Janeiro also served as local of worship for the Russian, Greek and Armenian communities in the city until they built their own temples. The Armenians, as they do not have a temple in Rio, still use Saint Nicholas church for baptisms and weddings celebrated by Armenian priests who come from São Paulo. Therefore, this church expresses religious solidarity among discrete Orthodox churches, which is not bounded by its ethnic connections with the Syrian-Lebanese community in Rio de Janeiro.

National imaginaries and forms of solidarity are also communicated in these religious arenas and institutions. Every year the Maronite church of Our Lady of Lebanon holds a celebratory mass for the day of Independence of Lebanon, in which the church is decorated with Lebanese flags[22] and to which all Lebanese, Maronite, and non-Maronite are invited. Also, the dignitaries of the Melkite and the Orthodox Churches and, sometimes, even Sunni and 'Alawi religious leaders participate as guests in the mass. Furthermore, the religious leaders often acted as representatives of the imagined national community, as a letter from Elias Ghoreyeb, the leader of the Maronite

community, in which he urged the Brazilian government to recognize the independence of Lebanon while this was still being negotiated with France in 1936.[23]

The religious spaces of the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian communities also constitute arenas where discrete configurations of the religious and ethnic community are produced and expressed through the perfomative mobilization of transnational connections, religious imaginaries and forms of political solidarity. Thus, when the Russian Czar, Nicholas II, was executed with his family by the Bolsheviks in 1918, there was a memorial service for the soul of the "*ex-emperor of Russia*" as he was referred in the registry book of the mass. Representatives of the diplomatic missions, the Brazilian press and of several institutions of the Syrian Lebanese community—such as the Syrian-Brazilian Red Cross (*Cruz Vermelha Syrio-Brazileira*) and the *Comité Patriotique Syrio-Libanais*[24]—were present in the mass, which affirmed the importance of the Russian monarch in the religious imagination of the Orthodox community in Brazil as the political protector of Orthodox Christianity.

Another occasion in which Saint Nicholas church served as an arena for the performative expression of forms of solidarity and shared transnational political imaginaries was when Adib Shishakli, ex-president of Syria (1951–1954), was murdered by a Druze[25] in his farm in Goiás, central Brazil, in 1964. Shishakli's body was taken to Saint Nicholas church, where the memorial prayer (*salat janaza*) was performed by Hasan Safatli the *shaykh* of the 'Alawi community, in the presence of the Orthodox Mutran Georges al-Hajj. Thus, Shishakli, who was a Sunni Muslim, had his memorial performed by a Lebanese 'Alawi shaykh in the Orthodox cathedral of Rio de Janeiro, before his body was sent to be buried in Syria.[26] This event dramatically expressed the symbolic connection of the Arabic-speaking immigrants and their descendants in Rio de Janeiro with the political imaginary of Syrian and Arab nationalism in the Middle East, producing a shared identity and a sense of community that went beyond their religious or national differences. Therefore, the Syrian-Lebanese community in Rio de Janeiro affirmed locally its internal cohesion in face of the political tensions and divisions that were publicized by Shishakli's murder, by positioning itself as an upholder of the version of Syrian and Arab nationalism embodied by the Syrian ex-president.

Transnational connections were also expressed in the religious practices of the members of the religious communities. Among the 'Alawi community in Rio de Janeiro, those who go to Syria usually visit

the tomb of *shaykhs* or saints and bring green ribbons blessed with *baraka* (spiritual/religious power) to those who cannot go, and they use it tied around their wrists as a concrete symbol of their religious and family transnational links with Syria. This process works both ways, as shows the chapel dedicated to "*Nossa Senhora da Penna*" (Our Lady of Penha) in the entrance of the old city in Jbeil. This Catholic devotion is linked to the main pilgrimage church in Rio de Janeiro, from which the icon of the chapel comes from—which is located in the neighborhood of "Penha"—and was taken to Lebanon by immigrants who returned from Brazil.

The capacity of the religious institutions created by the Arabic-speaking immigrants in articulating local, national and transnational spheres of belonging and identity was hindered by the wave of nativist nationalism that emerged in Brazil after the creation of the fascist-inspired political order known as the *Estado Novo* (New State) in 1937, during the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945). Under the *Estado Novo* all "foreign" ethnic and religious institutions had to be "nationalized," proving that they were compatible with the "Brazilian culture" and being managed by Brazilians. This was done through a judicial process in which the institution asked to be recognized as "Brazilian" for having fulfilled all the requirements. The Saint Nicholas Orthodox Society was recognized as Brazilian in 1940. According to the wording of the judge's decision "*the society is Brazilian, notwithstanding its acceptance as members of Orthodox believers of any nationality*."[27]

With the Muslim Charitable Society of São Paulo, however, the process was not easy. Having asked in 1941 for its recognition as a Brazilian association on the grounds that it was a "*strictly religious association*,"[28] the Society had to wait until 1948 for a final decision on its status, which granted the demand. The process included several investigations by the Brazilian services of intelligence which, despite not finding anything that could hinder the demand of the Society, were always followed by requests of further investigation by the judges. It is significant that all the arguments of the representatives of the Muslim Charitable Society stress the similarity of the religious message of Islam with that of Catholicism, to the point that a petition dated from 15 July 1941, asking for a decision on the process, stated that:

> …sermons are regularly delivered in the premises [of the Society], which are useful for the sons of its members, who are

> almost all Brazilians, as the preaching urges them to practice constantly the solid and healthy principles of Christian morality and the habit of loving the fellow humans, shaping their character for a life that is useful for themselves, for their family and for society.[29]

The necessity to claim that a Muslim religious institution was transmitting Christian values to its members in order to convince a judge about its compatibility with the Brazilian moral and cultural order shows well the difficulties that the Middle Eastern immigrants faced in order to have their religious traditions accepted by the Brazilian society. These difficulties were not restricted to Muslims, as Orthodox, Melkites, and Maronites also faced prejudice and cultural rejection towards their religious traditions.

While most Arabic-speaking immigrants to Brazil were Christians, their religious life was often seen with suspicion or rejection by the Brazilian society, which did not recognize the rituals and beliefs of the Oriental churches as a valid form of Christianity. The cultural distance towards the eastern Christianity created an unsettling ambiguity to the Brazilian elite, for the Arab immigrants were neither familiar (they were not Catholics) nor exotic (but they were Christians) enough to be properly classified.[30] The liminal character of the immigrants created a great deal of cultural anxiety in relation to their presence in Brazil, as it can be seen in a passage of the book *Rondônia*, published in 1917 by the Brazilian ethnologist Edgar Roquette-Pinto, who stated that:

> Arabs, Syrians and Turks peddle everywhere (. . .) There is no foreign element that is more diffuse in the surface of the country. In the hinterlands of Mato Grosso, in the Amazon forest, in Minas Gerais, in the capital of the Republic live large masses of "Turkish" merchants (. . .) Nobody knows with certainty what is their name, from where they are, [or] what is their religion.[31]

Therefore, the Arabic-speaking immigrants faced many difficulties in having their religious traditions accepted by the Brazilian society. Therefore, there was a strong pressure for them to adopt Roman Catholicism. Even the traditions of the Maronite and the Melkite church, which were submitted to the religious authority of the Pope,

were not recognized as fully legitimate Christian traditions by the Catholic institutions in Brazil.

The vice-president of the Federation of Arab Institutions in Rio de Janeiro (FEARAB–Rio), Roberto Habib, recalled in an interview how he faced prejudice against Orthodox Christians in a Catholic school in the 1950s:

> Me and my brother, we were choir-boys at the Orthodox church. The Orthodox mass happened at the same time that the Catholic mass in the church of the school, which the students had to attend. My father asked permission for us to go to the Orthodox mass instead. The principal refused, saying that the only mass that they recognized as valid was the Catholic one (. . .) The two sons of the Orthodox priest also studied in my school and people would point at them saying "You see? They are sons of a priest!" Once I had to tell a functionary of the school, "This is not something bizarre, Orthodox priests can marry!"[32]

The social pressure for the adoption of Catholicism was enhanced by the fact that Catholic religiosity was a culturally sanctioned source of meaning and symbolic resources, as well as an index of the cultural integration of the immigrants in the eyes of the Brazilian society. A descendant from the Jabour family, which had an important role in the Orthodox community in Rio de Janeiro recalled in an interview that "it was impressive how much of their efforts to integrate passed through the adoption of Catholic religiosity."[33]

The incorporation of Catholic devotional practices usually accompanied upwards social mobility and/or life crisis. Thus, Wadih Gebara and his son Philippe, rich Lebanese industrialists and businessmen who were part of the Greek-Catholic Melkite Council in Rio de Janeiro affirmed publicly their devotion to Our Lady of Penha (*Nossa Senhora da Penha*), the main pilgrimage site in Rio de Janeiro, in which church the latter baptized his son. Also, Philippe's wife made a promise to Our Lady of Glória (*Nossa Senhora da Glória*), another important Catholic devotion in Rio de Janeiro, in order to have a daughter.[34]

Conversion to Catholicism or the adoption of Catholic forms of piety also had a gendered dimension. As entrepreneurship was the main model of cultural legitimization and social integration of the male

Syrian-Lebanese immigrants in the Brazilian society,[35] charity, which had in the religious life its ideal realization, was valued as the main channel of social participation and integration for Syrian- Lebanese women. The charitable associations of the Orthodox, Maronite, Melkite, and 'Alawi communities created female branches, known as Ladies' Association (*Associação de Senhoras*), in order to attend to this demand for female charity.

However, the lack of theological or monastic institutions linked to the Orthodox, Maronite and Melkite Churches meant that the religious vocations—which were an important instrument of individualization and acquisition of moral autonomy within family structures in the Brazilian society of the first half of the twentieth century—had to be fulfilled in the Catholic Church. Therefore, it is not by chance that many Orthodox, Maronite, Melkite, and, even, Druze and 'Alawi families have Catholic nuns among their members. The most notorious case was that of Sister Zoé (1928–2012), a Catholic nun who embodied charity in the cultural imaginary of Rio de Janeiro due her efforts to create and keep institutions for homeless and old people. She was born Carmem Jabour in a very rich Orthodox family of entrepreneurs and her brother, Abrahão Jabour, who sponsored several of her projects and activities, had role of leadership in the Saint Nicholas Orthodox Society.[36]

This trend of conversion to Catholicism, which was even stronger in the generations born in Brazil, led to a constant decline of the religious institutions[37] created by the Middle Eastern immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the "ethnic revival" that happened in Brazil after the 1980s led the descendants of Middle Eastern immigrants to reshape their identities in relation to the gamut of ethnic/national identities—Syrian-Lebanese, Arab, Syria, Lebanese, and Palestinian—available to them. This process included the mobilization of religious codification, both Christian and Muslim, of ethnic/national identities, which led to a renewed engagement of member of the younger generations with the religious universe of their ancestors.

The trajectory of Philippe Gebara is very revealing of how the religious identity can be a pathway to forms of appropriation and codification of the Syrian-Lebanese identity that can include its transnational dimension. He is a twenty-three-year-old descendant of Syrians and Lebanese immigrants born in Rio de Janeiro, who define himself as "Syrian-Lebanese," had the Melkite Church as a cultural reference in the history of his family, together with the Arabic language

and the Syrian-Lebanese cuisine. After a youth disconnected from any ethnic identity, he started to be interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, through it, became curious about his own cultural heritage. After searching in the internet, he decided to create a community of the Melkite Church in the *Orkut* and started to share memories and information with other descendants of Melkite immigrants. Later on, he decided to attend the Melkite church in Rio de Janeiro and became involved in the religious universe of the community. Then he began an Arabic course and gradually saw in the Melkite religious identity an Arab cultural reference that could be fully articulated with the Brazilian society. Since 2011, Philippe is in a seminar in Lebanon preparing himself to become a Melkite priest.[38]

The trajectory of Anas Ayubi shows another possibility, as his incorporation of a Sunni Muslim identity in Lebanon allowed him to reclaim an Arab identity in Brazil. He is a twenty-five-year-old descendant of Lebanese born in Rio de Janeiro, who defines himself as "Arab." After growing up without much religious or ethnic identity for, as he said, he did not identify with Arab cultural diacritics, such as Arabic music or dance. As a kid he went with his mother to, Tripoli, in Lebanon in order to learn Arabic and become more acquainted with Islam, as it was the wish of his father. In Tripoli he discovered the religious universe of Islam and became very pious, returning to Brazil when he was twenty. He said that through Islam he was able to appreciate and understand his Arab identity, as he sees it connected to Muslim identity and to the history of Islam.[39]

From this analysis of the religious dynamics of the Arabic-speaking immigrants in Brazil we can see how religious practices and identities were intertwined with the construction of ethnicity and the negotiation and affirmation of their cultural differences in the Brazilian society. This connection between religion and ethnicity was made even more visible by importance that conversion to Catholicism had as a pathway to cultural integration and social acceptance in the process of upwards social mobility that was experienced by many immigrants and their descendants. The relevance that the Brazilian society attributed to religion as a diacritic of the cultural alterity of the Arabic-speaking immigrants made it a central arena for the negotiation of the cultural framework of their presence in Brazil.

Religious distinctions also played an important role among the Arabic-speaking immigrants in Brazil. Each religious group positioned its members in the Arabic-speaking community according to discrete moral and symbolic cosmologies that provided them with institutions,

networks of solidarity and social imaginaries that framed their trajectories in the Brazilian society. Furthermore, the religious groups also offered symbolic and practical transnational connections with the immigrants' "homeland."

The religious institutions and temples also functioned as spaces of connection of local, national and transnational moral, political and cultural spheres. In these spaces shared national or ethnic identities and forms of solidarity could be sometimes performed beyond the religious differences, such as it happened in the celebration the funeral of the former Syrian president Adib Shishakli, who was a Sunni Muslim, by an 'Alawi shaykh in the Orthodox cathedral of Rio de Janeiro. These same spaces also served as performative arenas for the moral community, affirming the specificity of each religious group within the larger community, as it was the case with the mass in memory of the Czar Nicholas II that had happened in the same cathedral decades before.

Despite the decline of the religious institutions of the Arabic-speaking community between the 1950s and 1980s due to conversion to Catholicism, the reaffirmation and reinvention of ethnic identities among the generations born in Brazil after the 1990s also included the reclaiming or acquisition of religious identities that could signal a Middle Eastern heritage. Therefore, religion remain an important reference in the processes of reinvention and affirmation of Syrian-Lebanese or Arab ethnicity in contemporary Brazil.

NOTES

[1] The zenith of Arabic-speaking immigration to Brazil was the period between 1884 and 1939, when 107,135 Middle Eastern immigrants entered the country; Jeffrey Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[2] Paulo G. H. da R. Pinto, *Árabes no Rio de Janeiro: Uma identidade plural* (Rio de Janeiro: Cidade Viva, 2010), 134.

[3] John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity.*

[4] The quota system was suspended only in the 1960s, when the entrance of immigrants in Brazil had already dropped to very small numbers.

[5] Jeffrey Lesser estimates that 65 percent of the Lebanese immigrants were Catholic (Maronite, Melkite, and Roman Catholic), 20 percent Orthodox, and 15 percent Muslim; Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity.*

[6] Charles Knowlton, *Sírios e libaneses em São Paulo* (São Paulo: Editora Anhembi, 1960), 58.

[7] Knowlton, *Sírios e libaneses em São Paulo*, 37.

[8] In Brazil, the "Syrian-Lebanese" identity was adopted by the Arabic-speaking immigrants after a rejection of a general "Arab" identity by some Lebanese immigrants, mainly the Maronite adepts of the non-Arab "Phoenician" identity of Lebanon, in order to create an institutional identity that could oppose the derogatory term "Turk" that the Brazilian society used to classify them. See Pinto, *Árabes no Rio de Janeiro*, 86–95.

[9] María del Mar Logroño Narbona, "The Development of Nationalist Identities in French Syria and Lebanon" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007), 151–52.

[10] Taufik Duoun, *A emigração sírio-libanesa às terras de promissão* (São Paulo: Tipografia Editora Árabe,1944); Taufik Kurban, *Os Syrios e Libaneses no Brasil* (São Paulo: Sociedade Impressora Paulista, 1933).

[11] Wadih Safady, *Cenas e cenários dos caminhos da minha vida* (São Paulo: Penna Editora, 1966), 145.

[12] Jorge Safady, "A imigração árabe no Brasil (1880–1971)" (PhD diss., Universidade de São Paulo, 1972), 260–61.

[13] Safady, "A imigração árabe no Brasil (1880–1971)," 204.

[14] Paulo Barreto, *As religiões do Rio* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Companhia Nacional, 1951 [1904]), 75.

[15] Interview with Father Marcelo, Saint Nicholas church, 2009.

[16] Paulo Trabulci, "Breve histórico dos melkitas no Brasil," *Boletim do Ordinário dos Católicos de Ritos Orientais do Brasil* no. 2 (1955): 47–48.

[17] "A Missão Libanesa no Brasil" (1931), document dated from 2007 present in the archive of the Lebanese Maronite Mission, in Rio de Janeiro.

[18] This society originated from the Palestinian Charitable Society (Sociedade Beneficente Palestina), which was created in 1927. It is not a coincidence that many Muslim associations were created by Palestinians, for they did not identify with the Syrian-Lebanese identity that gradually became the institutional form of self-identification of the Arabic-speaking immigrants in Brazil, and mobilized the Muslim identity in order to negotiate a different insertion in the Brazilian society.

[19] For ethnic boundaries the result of the production of cultural contrast in social interaction, see Barth 1998 [1969].

[20] The Patriarch Bill is reproduced in Arabic and Portuguese in the edition of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Crysostom that was published in São Paulo

in 1938. I thank Father Marcelo of the Saint Nicholas church for giving me access to this document.

[21] Thomas Eriksen, *Common Denominators, Ethnicity, Nation-Building and Compromise in Mauritius* (Oxford: Berg,1998).

[22] The church itself was built with white, red and green marble slabs decorating its interior, reproducing the colors of the Lebanese flag in its architecture.

[23] Letter kept in the archive of the Lebanese Maronite Mission, Rio de Janeiro.

[24] Registry book of the mass kept in the Archive of the Saint Nicholas Orthodox Society, Rio de Janeiro.

[25] Shishakli had brutally suppressed a revolt against his government in the Jabal Druze in 1954.

[26] Interview with Wissal Safatli, daughter of shaykh Hasan Safatli, 2009.

[27] Diário Oficial, 1940. This document is in the archive of the Saint Nicholas Orthodox Society.

[28] All the quotations are from the process REQT. S/D–São Paulo–Sociedade Muçulmana, Registro–Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana; DJI, 18 June 1941. This document is at the National Archive (Arquivo Nacional) in Rio de Janeiro. I thank Fabio Koifman for giving me a copy of this document.

[29] Petition annexed to the process REQT. S/D–São Paulo–Sociedade Muçulmana, Registro–Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana; DJI, 18 June 1941, 15.

[30] This classificatory ambiguity was also expressed in racial terms. For the Brazilian elites the Arab immigrants were neither white, "yellow" or black, and this defiance of racial categories created a great deal of cultural anxiety and rejection (Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity*).

[31] Edgar Roquette-Pinto, *Rondônia* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Companhia Nacional, 1917), 47–8.

[32] Interview with Roberto Habibi, 2009.

[33] Interview with Ana Maria Mauad, 2009.

[34] Antônio Carlos Cunha, *Philippe Gebara* (Rio de Janeiro, Abegraph, 2007) 28–31.

[35] See the articles in the 1923 special issue of the economic journal *Monitor Mercantil* praising the Syrian-Lebanese entrepreneurship as a form of "patriotism" towards Brazil.

[36] Irmã Zoé Jabour, *Meu Irmão Abrahão* (Rio de Janeiro: Associação Cultural Gibran,1981).

[37] There was a similar decline in the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian ethnic institutions during the same period.

[38] Interview with Philippe Gebara de Alcântara Tavares, 2009 and 2011.

[39] Interview with Anas Ayubi, 2009.