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**Scientific Area** Anthropology



# The Flights of *Barakah*: Transnational Flows of Charisma between Lisbon and Nova Sofala

## INTRODUCTION

Academic study of Islam in Portugal has generally reflected the image that the main spokesmen of the Islamic community prefer to project in public space: that of an essentially scripturalist Islam, in which religious truth derives from the reading and hermeneutics of the Quran and the Hadith, within a rationalist framework that is ostensibly compatible with modernity.

This research, focusing on the congregation that gathers at the Al Qadriyah mosque, in Laranjeiro, highlights a different Islamic sensibility: one where Portuguese Muslims travel to the Mozambican beach of Nova Sofala to pray at the tomb of an unknown saint, Sufi leaders are crowned with wreaths upon arrival at the Portela Airport, and a strand of hair from the Prophet is exhibited on the outskirts of Lisbon as a sacred relic during the celebrations of Muhammad's birthday. In this study, we examine how these "charismatic muslimnesses", sometimes affiliated with Sufism and sufi orders, draw on the mobilization, transmission and circulation of spiritual power (*barakah*) through a vast transnational network where Portugal is also included.



Arrival of Sufi sheikh Syed Muhammad Jilani Ashraf at Lisbon airport (28/10/2018)

## OBJECTIVES / RESEARCH CHALLENGES

- This project aims to chart and characterize the multiple dimensions that make up the transnational space inhabited by the Muslims who attend the Al Qadriyah Mosque, in Laranjeiro, a place of worship founded by Muslims of indo-Mozambican ancestry that practices a Sufi-inspired religiosity and where access to spiritual resources through intermediaries such as Sufi sheikhs, holy men, or their tombs and relics is explicitly encouraged.
- Starting from this strictly circumscribed terrain, we will then extend our analysis to other geographies, mainly in Africa, and Europe, through a multi-sited ethnographic approach. This critical cartography of the flow of believers, sheikhs, sacred objects, printed material, debates, discourses and its contestations, will allow us to identify and describe the sustainability mechanisms that feed this congregation in Portugal, a very peripheral context in relation to the centers of spiritual and institutional power of Sufism and "charismatic" Islam.
- Simultaneously, we will clarify how the presence of Sufi-inspired Islam, in contemporary Portugal, as well as its relationship with other Islamic sensibilities, reflect a long history of debate and confrontation between different doctrinal inclinations during the XX century and extend certain colonial logics to the present, echoing differentiated relations of Islam(s) with political power in the south-Asian Muslim world, in pre and post-colonial Mozambique and in contemporary Portugal.

## METHODS / METHODOLOGIES



Praying at the Al Qadriyah mosque, Portugal (top), at the shrine / tomb of Nova Sofala, Mozambique (left bellow) and at the European headquarters of Spiritual Foundation, in Leicester, UK (right, bellow)

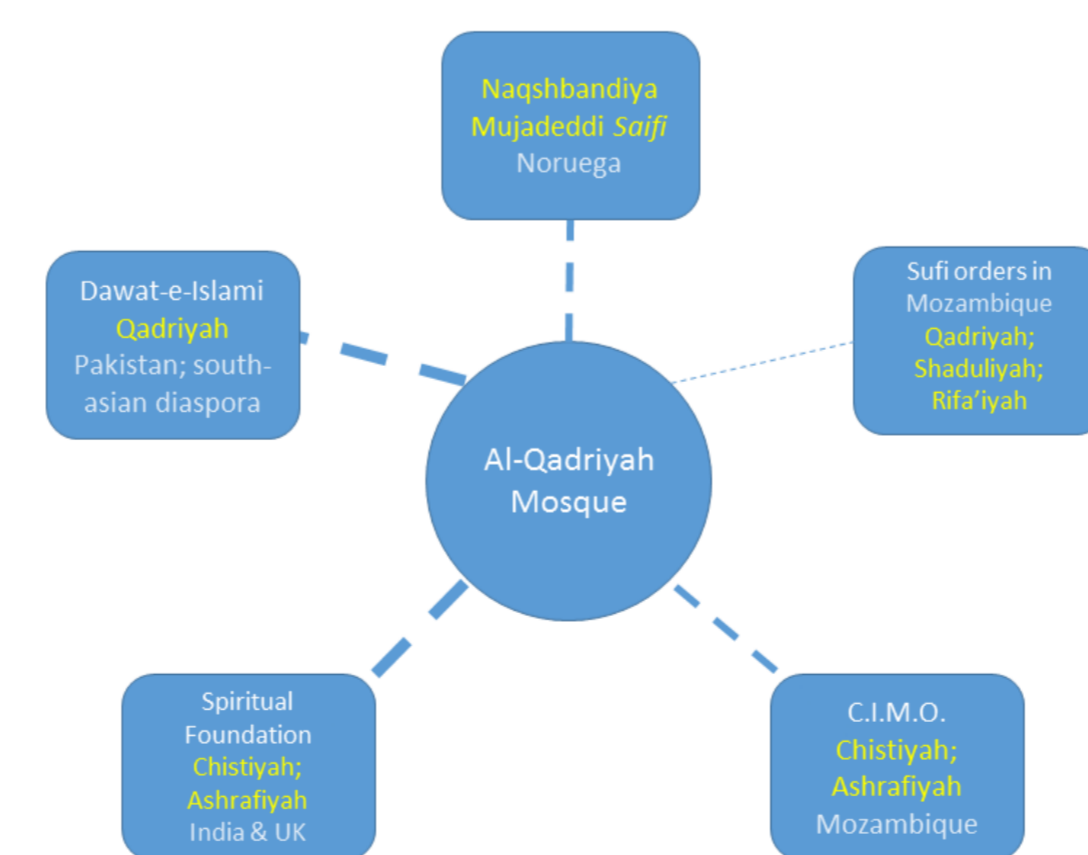


- Semi-participant observation at the Al-Qadriyah mosque; semi-structured interviews, life stories and family stories with selected members of the congregation; exploration of their wider social and family contexts (homes, workplaces and other spaces of conviviality).
- Exploration of adjacent contexts: the Al Madinah Mosque, also in Laranjeiro, but with a scripturalist doctrinal orientation; local institutions involved in the management of religious diversity; the Islamic Community of Lisbon; other Sufi / charismatic mosques, such as the Al Gausiyah mosque, in Odivelas.
- Ethnographic approach to major global articulation nodes involved in the charismatic flows that feed the Al Qadriyah mosque:
  - Mozambique - the tomb/shrine of Nova Sofala, where many Portuguese Muslims travel in pilgrimage; CIMO - Islamic Community of Mozambique, headquartered in Beira, the main umbrella organization for Sufi inspired Islam in Mozambique
  - United Kingdom - the European headquarters of the Sufi organization Spiritual Foundation, in Leicester, with which the Al Qadriyah mosque is affiliated; the Indo-Mozambican community residing in Leicester

## RESULTS

Although not itself a sufi order, the Al Qadriyah Mosque is a place of worship that sanctions / legitimizes a religiosity that incorporates elements of Sufism. But, in such a peripheral context as Portugal, access to charismatic power (*barakah*) operates mainly through a transnational network that connects the congregation to more or less remote geographies: their native lands in Mozambique, India and Pakistan, and other countries of the diaspora (mainly the UK) where these sources of spiritual and institutional power are already reproduced.

Thus, the mosque works as a rotating platform where *sheikhs* of different Sufi orders circulate, touring the countries of the Muslim diaspora, and with whom members of the congregation establish master-disciple pacts



Main connections of the Al Qadriyah mosque with transnational institutions, associated Sufi orders and countries of origin

(*ba'ya*) during these ephemeral - and often unannounced - visits. Subsequent relationships with these *sheikhs* are often precarious and heavily mediated, creating a network of unstable remote connections marked by insecurity and unpredictability, on the one hand, but also by a remarkable degree of agency that allows the disciples to manipulate these charismatic resources in a quite autonomous way.

In this context of spiritual instability, the memories of the homeland and particularly the narratives of miraculous events around the shrine of Nova Sofala, near the Mozambican city of Beira, evoke in the congregation a "remote proximity" to an irradiation center that is perceived as unchanging, bridging a gap that is not only geographical but also between the present and colonial times.

## CONCLUSIONS

This work highlights new configurations of Sufi-inspired Islam in a particular context of the Islamic diaspora characterized by its marked peripherality. To the Indo-Mozambicans in the Al-Qadriyah mosque, the peripheral status of Portugal in the transnational Sufi panorama does not derive only from the distance to the main centers of spiritual and political power in Sufism, but emerges also from the invisibility of this Islamic doctrinal orientation in the Portuguese public space. Sufi-inspired Islam is, in Portugal, definitely non-normative, if at all apparent in the eyes of the general population, an invisibility that contrasts with its place in the Islamic landscape of Mozambique and South Asia. Thus, for these Muslims, transnational links are not merely a way of receiving a personal blessing from their sheikh, of being physically near the flow of *barakah* emanating from the tomb of a saint, or even just a strategy to ensure material or symbolic sustainability for their mosques in the diaspora. They are also a form of remembrance, a recollection, sometimes tinged with nostalgia, of a time and a place where this kind of charismatic religiosity was embedded in day-to-day life. Regular, or even occasional, travel to Mozambique, as well as the constant flow of people, stories and objects between Portugal and East Africa, serves, on the one hand, to deepen the perception of this abyss between both countries, and, on the other, to facilitate a flight – even if only of the imagination – from the invisible world of Sufi Islam in Portugal.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was developed with the financial support of Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT), PhD Grant SFRH/BD/131935/2017