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Aesthetics and Poetics of Apostolic Islam in France

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France
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Their long beards often contrast their young faces; they wear traditional Pakistani garb (*khamiss*) or more generally white tunics (*djellaba* or *gandoura*) that flow to their ankles, a skull-cap (*taguilla*), and perhaps a pair of Nikes or Reeboks. Rain or shine, they untiringly cross mountains and valleys throughout France and the entire world in small groups of three or five, rarely more, to propagate the message of Allah. For the most part they are French, mainly of Moroccan origin or more broadly of Maghrebi or African origin, and are called Mohamed, Rachid, Amadou, or Moustafa, but also Eric, Thomas, Patrick, or Didier. They are male, but are increasingly accompanied by young women proudly wearing headscarves and participating in the effort of propagating their faith. They are mostly between 18 and 35 years of age and live essentially in the French suburbs,¹ where the cumulated difficulties of unemployment, exclusion, and racism are predominant. They are the new converts or 'reconverts' (voluntary return to the religion of their parents) to Islam, the knights of conversion and of pietism, according to the expression of the Moroccan sociologist Mohamed Tozy.² These new 'flag bearers' of an apostolic and ostentatious Islam are all religious militants of the Tabligh movement in France.

In France, the Jama'a Tabligh exists officially under the form of a non-profit association called Faith and Practice (Foi et Pratique), registered in April 1972 in the Seine-Saint-Denis prefecture. Since 1960, the first groups of preachers coming from Pakistan began to travel throughout France creating adepts amongst the first Maghrebi immigrants, and demanding places of worship, which aided them in their aims, before pushing their activism further. Since the end of the 1980s, the Tabligh movement has come to include mainly the second, even the third generation of children of Maghrebi



French rapper Kery James, a convert to Islam.

immigrants. The Tabligh is currently very organized and has developed local, regional, national, and extra-national ties. This fact is especially remarkable in its ramifications throughout such suburbs as Mantes La Jolie, the Quatre Mille housing estates in Courneuve, or Neuhoef or Mulhouse in Alsace, but also in large cities such as Marseille, Lyon, Lille, etc. In Lorraine, the region that we know the best, Faith and Practice covers a zone of influence from the city of Forbach (Moselle), which is its epicentre, spreading from Nancy to Bar-le-Duc, passing through Verdun and Longwy, reaching yet other regions: Mulhouse in Alsace, Dijon in Bourgogne. This transnational Islamic network, the largest in the world, counts an increasing number of adepts.

Surviving by identity migration³

To understand the adherence to the Tabligh movement, it is necessary to look at the self-image that often prevails among youths that live in rough neighbourhoods, since they are joining this movement of predication in increasing numbers notably in the French suburbs. The social and economic misery as well as the segregation and discrimination at the workplace, based on their physical features and their housing situation, are just some examples of the violence inflicted upon them by a consumer society that places them at the periphery of everything: consumerism, citizenship, education, etc. This sentiment of racism is strongly felt by these youths, who already have substantial identity problems. Often in majority from African, Turkish, or Asian immigrant families, these youths had incredible difficulties in situating themselves symbolically in the host country in as much as the persistent ideas of a mythical return to their homelands lived on. This is true most notably for youths of Maghrebi immigration: 'I am neither from here nor there', as a youth from the suburbs north of Marseille told us. The result is misery in terms of identity and an absence of stable points of reference⁴ for these youths, who thus develop substitute micro-identities.⁵

It is essentially in the hip hop⁶ culture that they invest themselves, but also in delinquency, so as to access the consumerism from which they feel excluded by either deviant over-consumerism, engaging in sports (namely individual combat sports), and less commonly by studying. These micro-identities can coexist and even be in competition. However, the strata of these parcelled identities reveal an overall negative self-representation. It is often by opposition to a society of rich people ('suit-and-tie-ers'), that their self-perception is constructed ('cap-and-trainers'). The society that stigmatized them by signs (often linked to their national origins) and by signals (fashion, vernacular language in the housing estates, regrouping, way of being) also attributed labels to them, taken up as well at times by the media: sly-guys, squatters, zoners, wild-child(ren). These negative labels are born from physical criteria (facial features), geographic criteria, or spatial criteria (coming from a violent neighbourhood, deemed 'sensitive' – unemployment, social welfare). Little by little, these negative labels are interiorized and even proclaimed. An inversion of the self-presentation is thus obligatory. The youths present themselves voluntarily in conformity with the deformed image of themselves that society confers them: they present themselves as dangerous individuals, or difficult to access; they wander around in groups, speak loudly, and behave violently among themselves, with provocative gestures in public transport, or by exhibiting the signals that incite mistrust or defiance (pitt-bulls, shaved heads). But ambivalence in the discourse and the practices of the youths is striking: they hate the well-off, who are at the source of all their problems, yet they want to appropriate all of the emblems (name-brand clothing, fine cars, pretty girls), and they hate their 'ghetto', the housing es-

tates into which they were born. However, to the question 'what would you do if you became very rich?', they answer without hesitation: 'I would buy the neighbourhood, the housing estate, and I would redo everything with sports fields and all'.

In short, it is in the hip hop culture that a certain number of these youths find their points of reference in this unjust, dangerous, and racist society. It is a response to the emptiness that submerges them: 'Rap is the last way to escape the emptiness; we all know that a good part of the brothers of the neighbourhood will never make it to university', sighs Method Man, one of the members of the Wu Tang Clan.⁷ In this identity-void of the youths of the suburbs, the hip hop culture plays a role of 're-positivation' of reality: trust exists between the local representatives who recognize each other and hold each other in esteem, contrary to the general suspicion in the neighbourhoods. The self-image is made more noble and thus more acceptable. The appeal of hip hop and notably American rap music (with the west coast – Los Angeles – seen as libertine and the east coast – New York – as more spiritual), which is, in our opinion, the most important aspect, next to graffiti and dance, should be researched in terms of not only the appeal of America as the El Dorado of freedom, but also and especially the African-American music and identity references. In effect, the history of African-Americans has many similarities with the stories of the suburban youths: forced immigration, racism, political or cultural resistance, demanding of civil rights, and African origins. The prestige still enjoyed by the Black Panthers, Martin Luther King, or Malcom X is the flagrant proof of this. These confluences between histories perhaps leads to reinvesting the religious through the figures of African-American culture oscillating between music and religion: Grand Master Flash, Mc Hammer, Public Enemy (Nation of Islam), Big Daddy Cane, and De La Soul for rap notably on the eastern coast; Ahmad Jamal for jazz; Mohamed Ali or Mike Tyson for sports; and Malcom X for politics.

In France the figures of Islam in rap also play a role in what has been called the phenomenon of re-Islamization of the suburbs. Here we can cite the rappers who proclaim Islam such as the group Ideal J (Rohff and Kerry James, singers) or the singer Akhenaton, a convert to Islam of Italian origin from the group IAM, Abdelmalik of the group NAP (Nouveaux Poètes de la Rue/New Street Poets), Disiz La Peste, Sat (of the group Fonky Family), or the rap singer Wallen. Music often plays the dual role of media in the reconstruction of the self for the youths in these territories in which misery and deviance predominate: a role of horizontal media, on the one hand, between the cultures of either side of the Atlantic, but also vertical media between young rappers and the sacred. It is naturally towards a transcendence to which the youths often turn after having had a taste of rap and its multiple imbrications with religion. Despite its success, the group NAP, unique in its genre, is the only one, along with IAM, to ostensibly promote a verbalized culture of Islamic rap. Un-

fortunately space does not allow for elaboration on the subject of analysis between rap and religion in France and the USA, but we can note that rap has often been the highly present crypto-identity of the youth before being dethroned by that of the militant preacher of the Tabligh. There again the parallels between 'the preaching of the rapper and the rap of the preacher', as philosopher of the arts Christian B  thune put it, are telling. The sources of American rap are probably found in the same meanders as the preachers and other gospels or forgotten spirituals.⁸ These sources in any case were the media supports for an uncertain identity taken on by the youths that we followed and little by little direct themselves towards the religious as a fundamental authority to manage their wandering subjectivity. This moment of passage from the profane (deviant, nihilist, or musical) to the sacred religious thus marks the end of this identity migration thanks to the religion of Islam, which becomes the ultimate goal, and predication according to Tabligh, the *modus operandi*.

Career in the Tabligh

The JHETs⁹ often have known or have gone through the identity migration described above before finally investing further in predication within the Tabligh. A number of militants interviewed were adepts of rap music; some were even DJs or MCs in local discotheques or groups. Abandoning rap and music in general (listening, writing, or playing it) is more or less irreversible upon entry into the Tabligh. Through the process of 'religious professionalization', the transformation is carried out more or less cleanly. We can in effect speak of a 'religious career' within the Faith and Practice association. The militants of the Tabligh are initially recognizable by their sort of 'workers of God' uniform. It is a specific physical-vestiary aspect: beard, prayer beads, *siwak* stick, *gandoura* for the men, and headscarf for the women. It is a new way to present oneself physically, spiritually, and verbally, which is constructed in a society that, according to them, never accepted and recognized them. It is thus interesting to note that one can follow relatively precisely this 'militant career of preachers' by an original physical indicator: the length of the beard. The length of the latter allows for a rather precise traceability of the career in terms of engagement of the JHET in the Tabligh. The greater the degree of engagement, the more the indicator of beard length (seen as highly recommended religiously) increases, and vice versa. There are four discernible phases of engagement in the Tabligh religious career: first, there is a disorderly and disorganized life, often far from God in terrains of exclusion, without resources and without a future. The subjectivity is often fragmented and lacking in points of reference. Second, there is a religious progressivity that coincides often with a cohabitation of several identities, at times antagonistic: that of the dealer or the delinquent with apostolic Islam was the most remarkable – selling drugs to subsist yet frequenting simultaneously, and increasingly, the mosque and the Tabligh.

Poetics in France

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At a bookstall at the congress of the Jeunes Musulmans de France (JMF).

The third phase comprises an unconditional engagement where the militant is in a period of 'religious forcing'. He speaks only of Allah, of His qualities, of paradise and hell; his investment in the predication of the Tabligh is at its maximum. He undertakes missions that lead him at times very far from home, even as far as New Delhi, India (where the Tabligh founder's tomb is located), to Pakistan (Lahore and Peshawar), and even further away to, for example, China, the USA, or South Africa. The worried and regular opposition of families to reduce his missionary engagement are to no avail. This period of unconditional engagement in Faith and Practice ends with what Donegani calls 'intransigence' of the convert; this initial zeal is taxed voluntarily by global society as 'fundamentalism', notably due to the physical-vestiary aspect of the JHET, the beard causing confusion between them and the televised images of radical Islamists from all four corners of the world. At this stage there is metamorphosis: the young militant cuts himself off from the world. Often he no longer watches television, no longer listens to music, selects his friends, avoids sexual promiscuity with women, goes out little, and prays a lot. He begins thus, like a hermit, to fast regularly, to consecrate himself to meditation, prayer, and study. He uses to his benefit the time allotted him often by his status as being on unemployment or as occasional worker, to improve his faith and his practice. It is a politics of asceticism and chastity, which is demanded and applied to and against the ostentation of consumer society. Concerning the religious criteria, non-consumerism becomes in this sense increasingly a means and an end, a veritable Islamic leitmotiv to accept the unacceptable of the life of exclusion that they once knew. The hyper-visibility is expressed by the body or the discourse during this crucial period of engagement.

Finally, in the fourth phase, the Tabligh militant often passes through a period in which he reinvests in society having found the capacity to go beyond the cleavages and to inverse the stigmas of which he was the object. It is the 'Muslim is beautiful' period. He finds the marks and points of reference that help him to have full awareness of himself and of others. He reconstructs a sense for himself by using a citizen discourse. For example, in the racist neighbour he now only sees an inoffensive creature of God, stray and ignorant, for whom one must have compassion, patience, and kindness. Also, social failure is seen as a simple ordeal that one has to overcome; poverty is seen as a good that prevents one from being tempted by over-consumerism. At this moment of rupture, to prove that they have finally found the median behaviour between religious zealotry and the life devoid of sense in the suburbs without money, dignity, and a future, the appearance owing to the 'impassioned faith' often transforms into a 'social transparency' in which the preachers no longer wear the traditional garb and shorten their beards – the proof is that they have succeeded in finding this difficult compromise between their own faith and the laws of the Republic. They voluntarily call this phase 'the middle path', a formula extracted from

the Qur'an (2:143). They thus return, after a phase of physical-vestiary hyper-visibility, to the most common social invisibility by taking up studies, jobs – albeit precarious –, associative activities, sports, or even citizens' activities. Their engagement in the 'congregation' of the Tabligh can then become cool, even critical, or non-existent.

The Tabligh movement, however, remains an associative religious movement under high surveillance by the General Intelligence agency and the Direction of the Territory Surveillance notably since the Khaled Khelkal affair¹⁰ in 1995, at the time of the wave of attacks in Paris, but especially since the attack perpetrated by two young Frenchmen in Marrakech in 1994.¹¹ The General Intelligence agency is especially interested in the most zealous religious preachers, who have gone for four months to Pakistan and India with the supposed eventuality of having joined training camps in Afghanistan. While Jean-Pierre Chevènement attempted to launch the bases of a French Islam representation,¹² the Tabligh remains under suspicion of instigating, in the secrecy of 'cellar mosques', potential Islamists – which remains unproven. Concerning the possible 'fundamentalism' within the Tabligh, our approach to the Tabligh field in France did not allow for finding conclusive evidence in that sense or demonstrating any deviation of that type, until the present in any case.

Conclusion

This new diasporic Islamic youth, socialized in France, is impassioned with spirituality in a Western universe that lacks sense. In this way the JHET believe they offer something positive to this globalizing society. The concern for respecting certain religious taboos and that for ecological aspirations (such as the quality of air, the sanitary quality of food, or kindness to animals) also exist among the militants; in that sense it is an interesting convergence of the religious and the modern. In addition, the Tablighis remain faithful to the principal of being apolitical, also very modern, advocated very early on by Muhammad Ilyas, the founder. This characteristic that separates the religious from the political may explain the long survival of this network, which following the example of the Internet – on which it is extremely present – has also managed to weave its web throughout the world. Our interviews also show that Islam is lived by the youths as a globalizing cultural system, organizing the sense of their practices by an Is-

lamization of subjectivity within the Tabligh group. Engaging in 'this voluntary grouping of religious intensity'¹³ allows subjectivity to reconstruct itself around federating ideas such as 'prophetic imitation' or the 'hunting down of evil and exhorting good'. It is therapy by a rigorous religiosity within an ascetic structure that inspires security in the face of temptations of the self, dangers of the suburbs in particular and the world in general. This structure preserves the torn identity, allowing it to completely re-socialize and to arm itself against the social evils (exclusion, drugs, delinquency). It seems thus to confirm that the passage into and engagement in Faith and Practice in France is a moment of transition for the socio-religious identity, an intermediary structure of re-socialization, which has as its role to reconstruct the self. It is the experience of an identity migration (hard life, delinquency, hip hop) towards a transcendence that pulls these militant youths out of their negative and monotone day-to-day existence, thus bringing them to a moral obligation. According to our analyses, Tabligh allows these missionaries to create bases and support for the solid subjectivation in 'the spaces of authenticity where unauthenticity is banned'. Locally, the former Tabligh militants, due to their symbolic religious prestige, often become privileged in certain municipalities since they know the problems of violence in the area – and this evolution has been confirmed. These young Muslims who have reconstructed a new subjectivity through the religious, are the new emerging actors in the suburbs and in the city by demanding a French and Muslim identity. Yet by means of the sacred, these youths have chosen to invest in this movement of predication and seem to have thus found their lost dignity of an identity that had been erring somewhere between the two shores of the Mediterranean. To conclude, we partially rejoin Oliver Roy,¹⁴ who thinks that these young Muslims are not the enemies of modernity – as Western societies often judge them to be – but rather its products and, even more so, its effective producers and actors.

This article is based on part of the author's post-graduate (D.E.A.) thesis: M. Khedimellah, 'Des ténébres de la foi à la lumière, la Jama'a Tabligh en Lorraine' (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, September 1999).

Notes

1. The term 'suburbs' here refers to the French term *banlieue*.
2. M. Tozy, *Monarchie et islam politique au Maroc* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1999).
3. The term 'identity migration' is an English rendering of the French *transhumance identitaire*, a concept on which I have published and which I personally defend.
4. Cf. Farhad Khosrokhavar, *l'Islam des jeunes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).
5. Cf. Moussa Khedimellah, 'Rôle de la culture islamique dans l'histoire algérienne. Ses effets sur la perception de soi et l'altérité sur les enfants de migrants en France', *Revue Euro-Orient*, no. 4 (February–May 1999).
6. Cf. Hugues Bazin, *La culture Hip Hop* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995).
7. Cf. interview with Method Man (Wu Tang Clan) with Olivier Cachin, *l'Affiche*, Special Issue no. 2.
8. Cf. Denis-Constant Martin, *Le Gospel afro-américain, des spirituels au rap religieux* (Paris/Arles: Cités de La Musique/Actes Sud, 1998).
9. JHET is an abbreviation for Jeunes Hommes Engagés dans le Tabligh (Young Men Engaged in the Tabligh).
10. Article in *Le Monde* entitled 'Moi, Khaled Kelkal', 7 October 1995.
11. Incriminating two former young militants of Faith and Practice from Courneuve, Redouane Hammadi and Stephane Aït Iddir, sentenced to death in Morocco on 26 January 1995 and who are still waiting for their sentences to be carried out.
12. The initiative was pursued under the ministry of M. Vaillant. In this attempt, the Tabligh was consulted as one of the main Muslim authorities, among which figure the Union of Islamic Organizations of France, the Paris Mosque, the National Federation of French Muslims, and the Larbi Kechat Mosque.
13. J. Ségué, 'Groupements volontaires d'intensité religieuse dans le christianisme et l'islam', *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, no. 100 (October–December 1997): 47–60.
14. O. Roy, 'Quel archaïsme?', *Autrement* (special issue, 'Islam, le grand malentendu', Mutations series), no. 95 (1987): 207–13.

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image not available online

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