

# Mosques and Muslims in Marseilles

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French colonial rule was legitimized by the idea of a civilizing mission, which supposedly served to bring inferior cultures into the paths of civilization and progress. Colonial societies and cultures were represented as part of a wider French identity sphere, and at the beginning of the twentieth century France positioned itself as a Muslim Great Power. In the overseas territories, colonial administrations established a spatial separation between indigenous and European communities. When colonialism came back home similar strategies of spatial segregation were drawn upon. In France, colonial workers and soldiers were usually housed in special barracks or camps, which were clearly demarcated from their surroundings, and at the colonial expositions indigenous cultures and societies became objects on display, to be viewed and experienced by European audiences.

Against the background of these colonial representations, the Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles issued a report in 1916, which laid down a detailed plan to build a copy of a Kabyle village outside the city. On the central square a bathhouse and a café would be established, as well as a typical North African mosque with arched windows and a 20 meters high minaret. The Chamber of Commerce hoped that the prospect of living in an "Arab village" would attract new Algerian workers.

The architects drew on several detailed French studies on the indigenous house, and on images of elaborate complexes of Arab villages displayed in the colonial expositions. At these exhibitions natives were invited to staff the replica villages in order to create an interesting *tableau vivant*. Colonial workers would now be invited to come and live in a genuine version of a Muslim village. However, the French war efforts prevented the materialization of the project in 1916.

In 1922, the National Colonial Exposition in Marseilles—a follow up on the successful exposition of 1906—attracted some 2 million visitors. The exposition contained pavilions, which represented the French colonies and protectorates. The Tunisian pavilion displayed a replica of a mosque and a courtyard with trees, which—according to the contemporary commentator André Dubosque—gave visitors the impression of being on the other side of the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Commentators praised the simplicity and accurateness of the indigenous houses on display in the Algerian pavilions, as well as the finesse of the ceramics that decorated the minaret of the mosque in the Moroccan section.

## Monumental mosques

Whilst the colonial exhibition in Marseilles was taking place, the construction of the Mosque of Paris had also begun. A variety of reasons underlay the establishment of a Grand Mosque in the centre of Paris—financially supported by the French government and the municipality of Paris. The mosque was intended to be a monument for the colonial soldiers who had fought in the French armies as well as a symbol of a pro-French loyalist Islam that could function as a counter weight to anti-colonial Muslim movements in North Africa. Thus the co-opted Algerian Si Kaddour Ben Ghabrit became the rector of the new Mosque of Paris until his death in 1954. The mosque was also to be enjoyed by the Parisian bourgeoisie, who could visit the steam baths or drink a mint tea in the Moorish café. Ironically, the new mosque did not primarily serve the religious needs of the Algerian colonial workers in Paris, and the poor Muslims who showed up at its doors were turned away because of their shabby clothing.<sup>2</sup>

**Islamic presence in western Europe is usually perceived as a post-war immigration phenomenon. However, early in the twentieth century Muslims were also sojourning on a regular basis in Europe, where they founded provisions and accommodations for their religious needs. The French city Marseilles is an interesting site for a historical reconstruction of representations about Islam and mosques in Europe. In colonial times, Muslims—mostly colonial workers or soldiers in the French colonial armies—frequented Marseilles. Since the 1950s, large numbers of Muslims arrived in the city as migrant labourers, and many settled there to become permanent residents.**

The inauguration of the Mosque of Paris in 1926, gave an impetus to similar mosque projects in other French cities. In 1937, the founder of a real estate group in Marseilles, Louis Cottin, created the Comité marseillais de la Mosquée de Marseille. Cottin was joined in his efforts by a local Algerian shopkeeper, named Talmoudi. The "mosque of Marseilles" would provide for the religious needs of the colonial workers, be a "testimony of the French recognition towards our Muslim brothers who have died for the fatherland," as well as, contribute to the "moral unity" of the North Africans in the city.<sup>3</sup> Local

architects developed a mosque complex, which also included a hostel, a restaurant, several dormitories, and medical facilities. Despite the fact that the Mayor of Marseilles and the prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône department supported the project, it soon became entangled in the party-political struggles that divided the city in those days.

Plans to establish a mosque re-emerged after the Second World War, when the idea was taken up by a new Comité de reconnaissance aux soldats ayant combattu pour la France. The Mayor of Marseilles, Michel Carlini, spoke out in favour of the new mosque and designated a plot of land in the centre of the city on which it could be built. Members of the municipal council hoped that the mosque might become an enrichment to the "artistic patrimony" of the city. Despite the availability of funds for the project, a problem arose in the expropriation of the real estate. By the early 1950s the rector of the Mosque of Paris, as well as the French secret service, fearing that a mosque in Marseilles might become an instrument in the hands of Arab nationalist movements, also raised new objections to the project.

## "Guest workers" and migrants

Migratory fluxes towards Marseilles continued during and after decolonization. To provide for the cultural and religious needs of the Muslim "guest workers," prayer rooms were established in the foyers for migrant workers. A larger house of worship in Marseilles was established in 1977. Located in an old commercial building in the centre of the city, it became one of the first sites of contentious struggles over the visible presence of Islam in Marseilles in the postcolonial period. In the early 1980s the leaders of the Mosque Committee wanted to enlarge the mosque and to decorate the entrance with a new façade. This was not to the liking of the Mayor of Marseilles—Gaston Deferre—who, as rumour has it, said to the president of the Mosque Committee: "make a place... but don't make it there... it is the entrance of the high way... I don't want the tourists who come to Marseilles to see the Arabs leaving the mosque."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the growing number of small houses of worship in the city, the idea that Marseilles should have a real mosque re-emerged by the late 1980s. In October 1989 the Mayor of Marseilles—Robert Vigouroux—declared that he was in favour of the establishment of a mosque: "like the one in Paris. I want it to be beautiful. In the first place, for the city. Moreover, such a mosque must be a symbol for the Muslims of Marseilles. A bit like the Cathedral is for Christians."<sup>5</sup>

Less than ten days after the Mayor had expressed this sentiment, a local Algerian businessman—Mustapha Slimani—presented a project for a mosque, which combined a religious, commercial, and cultural complex. The project included a huge mosque with a ground surface of 9,000 square meters and a 50 meters high minaret, which would provide for 15,000 to 17,000 worshippers. Slimani's megalomaniac project was completely out

of touch with the ideas and expectations of the representatives of Muslim associations in Marseilles. However, somewhat unfortunately, in public discourse this project became understood as an illustrative embodiment of the future "Cathedral Mosque" of Marseilles. Public and political protest against the project grew rapidly, and representatives of the extreme right Front National argued that the Muslim newcomers threatened the Christian identity of Marseilles. Confronted with public protests and arguing that the Muslims in Marseilles were not able to come up with a joined project, the municipality decided to call off the project in 1990.

## An Islamic religious and cultural centre

The issue returned on the local public agenda in the late 1990s. This time the demand for a Grand Mosque was articulated by members of a new elite of local politicians of Moroccan and Algerian descent. They framed their demand in terms of the need for an adequate and respectable place for Islamic worship, as well as the need for a symbolic gesture of recognition towards the Muslims in Marseilles.

The new round of discussions took place against the background of discussions about Islam in France, and the need for a national council of Muslim representatives. Accordingly, the municipality of Marseilles decided to start a consultation among representatives of Muslim associations in Marseilles and other local stakeholders. The idea was to build a central mosque that would be administrated by a council of local Muslim representatives. The religious centre would be combined with a cultural centre, which would be subsidized by public authorities, and help stimulate dialogue.

In 2002, an opposition arose between two different factions of Muslim associations in Marseilles. Local Mosque Committees affiliated to the Mosque of Paris—predominantly representing Algerian Muslims—claimed to represent the silent majority of Muslims in Marseilles. Moreover, Soheib Bencheikh—an employee of the Mosque of Paris who since 1996 claimed to be the "official mufti of Marseilles" but who was not recognized as such by most of the local Mosque Committees—supported the idea of establishing an Islamic cultural centre in the image of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. This centre would be open and transparent and would contribute to the development of a liberal Islam. Those committees were opposed by local Muslim associations, which claimed to represent younger generations and different ethnic communities. The associations led by younger Muslim representatives, founded a Council of Imams of Marseilles. The Council of Imams primarily wanted the new Grand Mosque to become a religious centre, which would contribute to the unity of Muslims in Marseilles and would illustrate the public recognition of Islam in France.

In the post-September 11 context, the diverging ideas of the Council of Imams and the Mosque Committees affiliated to the Mosque of Paris, were increasingly framed in terms of an opposition between extremists and liberals. The media spoke of the "mufti" as a proponent of a liberal Islam and the *New York Times* portrayed him as "an Algerian cleric who is clean-shaven and wears a suit and tie" who wants a mosque combined with a cultural centre with "poetry readings, concerts and dance performances." The Council of Imams was now represented as an ensemble of "fundamentalist clerics," and the chairman—Mourad Zerfaoui—as a "bearded Algerian biologist" whose "followers" try to "lure teenage boys toward the cause of conservative Islam."<sup>6</sup>

## Islam de proximité

In 2003, it became clear that the municipality intended to sign an agreement with the Mosque Committees affiliated to the Mosque of Paris and the "mufti." However, when the Council of Imams and their allies came out victorious in the elections for a regional Muslim coun-



PHOTO BY ROGER VIOLET, 1922

cil in the Bouches-du-Rhône department, municipal authorities could no longer afford to bypass these associations. The municipality of Marseilles now argued that perhaps the idea of establishing a Grand Mosque was outdated anyhow. Many of the existing houses of worship in Marseilles had been renovated or enlarged, and a number of new projects had emerged for middle-sized mosques in Marseilles. In June 2004, the Mayor of Marseilles—Jean Claude Gaudin—declared that he had decided to acknowledge the need for a multiplicity of houses of worship and for an "Islam de proximité." The municipality now wanted to support the establishment of an "Islamic cultural centre" in combination with an existing project for a new museum of immigration in Marseilles.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, it appears as if Islam in Marseilles had come full circle. Ordinary Muslims in Marseilles would now worship in the existing "neighbourhood mosques," whereas the dialogue between Muslims and French society would take place in a cultural centre that is to be linked to "a museum." Much like the colonial exhibitions of the beginning of the twentieth century, Islamic culture would be transformed into an object on display in order to allow for exchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims in Marseilles.

## The Moroccan Pavilion at the National Colonial Exposition in Marseilles, 1922

1. André Dubosque, *Revue Économique Française* 44, no. 3 (May-June 1922): 202.
2. See Mustafa Bayoumi, "Shadows and Light: Colonial Modernity and the Grande Mosquée of Paris," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 2 (2000): 267-292.
3. Letter of the "comité de patronage" to the prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône department, dated 22 June 1937, signed by Louis Cottin.
4. M. Mohand Alili (son of the former president of the Mosque Committee M. Hadj Alili), interview by Gaston Deferre, Marseilles, 23 March 2002.
5. Robert Vigouroux, *Profession Politique*, no. 52 (29 October 1989).
6. "Muslims remaking old France," *New York Times*, 10 April 2003.
7. "Le temps des 'mosquées cathédrales' semble révolu," *Le Monde*, 17 June 2004.

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