

Muslim Youth Cultures in Germany: Between Fun, Protest, and Service to Society

Muslim youth scenes that have emerged in the past years in Germany are not a phenomenon of migration, but rather an integrated part of local developments of youth culture. Young Muslims increasingly tend to identify as Muslim *and* as German, and consider themselves as active part of German society. This tendency is reflected in the diversity of youth cultural scenes and actors in which young Muslim are engaged.

A few years ago, the German journalist Julia Gerlach directed attention to the phenomenon termed 'pop-Islamic' youth culture. In her widely read book *Between Pop and Jihad: Muslim Youth in Germany*, she described a youth cultural current whose origin can be traced back to the 1990s but which gained importance following the attacks on 11 September 2001 and the discursive shifts in its aftermath.¹ Gerlach identified as a key characteristic of "Pop-Muslims" their self-conception defined by a rupture with passed-down identities and life-scripts of their parents and grandparents. Today, these youngsters and young adults consider an Islamic identity, a sense of belonging to the German society and a modern lifestyle as consistent and unambiguous. This article places the emergence of this current in the wider context of Muslim youth cultures in Germany.

Muslim youth cultures - a phenomenon of migration?

Within the last few years, several Muslim associations and initiatives were formed that stress their belonging to German society, while at the time insisting in one form or another on their Muslim faith. Recent social research has outlined various concepts of identity, which can be observed as ideal types among the 1.6 to 1.8 million Muslims below 25 years of age in Germany.² The boundaries between these ideal types are dynamic, and provide orientation rather than clear-cut differentiations. Michael Kiefer distinguishes, for example, between (1) non-religious or less religious, (2) fundamentalist, i.e. closely oriented towards traditional-religious norms, (3) nationalist-Islamic, and (4) activist-Muslim youth.³ It is important to note that in most cases, Islam is but one facet of identity, which forms the *Lebenswelt* of these adolescents. It provides, similar to a possible immigration background of their parents and grandparents, points of contact for influences out of social and ideological contexts that differ from the non-Muslim majority. Factors of influence are the family context and the use and consumption of media from their countries of origin, which are reflected in the everyday lives of young Muslims.⁴ However, it is not given that either a primary self-conception as Muslim or a possible identification as Arab, Turk or Albanian result in orientations and lifestyles which differ from those of the majority society in a fundamental way. Social status, educational background and gender are equally important factors in terms of impact on the adolescence of young Muslims.

Moreover, young Muslims share a socialization in German society with their non-Muslim peers, often reflected in 'hybrid identities' in which 'German-ness', ethnic origin and religion are merged together as complementary aspects of one's own identity.⁵ In this respect, Muslim youth scenes that have emerged in the past years are not a phenomenon of migration, but rather an integrated part of local developments of youth culture.

Secularization, tradition and new religiosity

The importance of Islam in the everyday lives of young Muslims has been the subject of numerous studies conducted among Muslims in Germany in recent years. Here, differences, which characterize the diverse *Lebenswelten* of young Muslims, become apparent. The representative study *Muslims in Germany* pointed to the large differences among Muslim pupils in regards to individual religious practices; for example, with regard to the frequency of praying or the visits of mosques.⁶ Yet religion plays an important role among young Muslims.⁷ There are certainly generational differences, for example, how religious Muslims express their religiosity in everyday life; young Muslims which were raised in Germany do not necessarily share the same orientations and traditions with which their parents or grandparents in Turkey and Lebanon have grown up. Furthermore, differences that appear between the different denominations and language groups have to be taken into consideration.⁸

Different to the countries of origin of their parents' and grandparents' generations, in which the membership of the Muslim community was often taken for granted, young Muslims in the setting of non-Muslim German society often express a desire to manifest their religious identity and affiliation to the Muslim community through rituals and symbols; rituals as fasting, prayer or wearing the headscarf thus become part of identity politics. The strict following of Islamic dietary laws, for instance, entails a clear message towards the environment as it serves as identification with the Muslim community, and as a marker of difference to non-Muslims.⁹

The phenomenon of 'reborn Muslims' or 'neo-Muslims' is also linked to this context. The term designates Muslim adolescents who were not necessarily religiously educated by their parents, but developed a strong affiliation to Islam during their adolescence.¹⁰ The strict orientation along religious values and norms symbolizes a biographical rupture through which a new phase of life is

introduced. For some of these young Muslims, this newly discovered religiosity represents a turning away from a lifestyle that was characterized by alcohol and drug abuse, promiscuity or even crime. The set of rules and unambiguous guidelines provide orientation and a sense of community and belonging.

The will to distance themselves from their parents and family might be another reason to turn towards religion. The religious practice of the parents' generations, which are often associated with traditional understandings of gender roles, appears to many young Muslims in Germany as inappropriate. The commitment with ostentation to Islam opens especially for young religious Muslim women the opportunity to challenge patriarchal traditions. They argue vis-à-vis their familial context that Islam gives them the right to education and to pursue a profession. Conscientious wearing of a headscarf and assertive orientation along religious guidelines might serve as means to claim rights and freedoms from their parents and brothers. In doing so, young women are able to claim a standing as pious Muslim women – a standing that is often valued higher in the socio-religious hierarchy than that of non-religious women.

Religion and belonging

Vis-à-vis non-Muslim society, young Muslims often insist on their right to live and express their religion according to their own orientation. In the light of discriminatory experiences in school and at work and confronted with anti-Muslim reservations in everyday life, the demonstrative commitment to Islam can also be interpreted as a self-confident response to social experiences. The fight against anti-Muslim racism that is often perceived as 'Islamophobia' and thus as directed against their own religious identity is reflected in the commitment to Islam.¹¹ Racially motivated crimes such as the murder of the Egyptian Muslim Marwa El-Sherbini in July 2009 in Dresden serve as a cause to unite as Muslims and to seek the community of believers.

Such explicit retreat to a distinct religious community contains conflict potential. The study *Muslims in Germany*, published in the summer of 2007, documents the spread of reservations among young Muslims toward non-Muslim majority society.¹² Examples for other problematic phenomenon related to the retreat to the *umma* are the popularity of often very rigid notions of gender differences, and the rejection of alternative sexual orientations as inconsistent with

Islamic traditions. The defamation of homosexuality as un-Islamic or the insistence on gender segregation in high schools and free time activities are expressions of such attitudes that are shared by many young Muslims. Strikingly, however, are again the similarities between the attitudes of young Muslims and non-Muslims. The respective educational background plays an important role in this context, as does social and economic status.¹³

Yet, precise and at once general statements about Muslims' sense of belonging are difficult to make. 59% of Muslims in Germany stated in a Gallup poll that they feel 'extremely' or 'very strongly' attached to their own community of faith, while only 40% expressed a similar attachment to Germany. Compared to the total population, however, this number is considerably high; only 32% of the general public identify as clearly with Germany. In this respect, the identification with Germany is more distinct among Muslims than in the population as a whole. This is also reflected in the trust that is put in state institutions. While 73% of German Muslims trust the courts, only 49% of the total population expresses a similar attitude; 61% of Muslims have confidence in the German government, while only 36% of the total population share such confidence.¹⁴

Young Muslims as social actors

Young Muslims who practice their religion explicitly and self-confidently play an important role in rendering Islam in Germany more visible. Often it is these young Muslims who seek contact to the public. The desire to establish Islam as an integral part of the German society is at the centre of their activism.

Associations as the Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland (MJD) [Muslim Youth in Germany], Lifemakers or Lichtjugend [Light youth], who often cooperate with non-Muslim actors, have established themselves in many cities as alternatives to traditional mosque associations and the large Islamic organizations. It is not so much the size of the membership that accounts for the importance of these initiatives. Only a small minority of the 3.8 to 4.3 million Muslims that live in Germany contributes to the activities of these associations. But with their public relations work, which is often addressed at Muslims and non-Muslims, they reach an audience that goes far beyond the circle of their active membership.

This has been recognized by the traditional Islamic organizations, who aim at preserving their influence on the interpretation of Islamic teaching and religious practices. Federal associations such as the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland [Central Council of Muslims in Germany], (ZMD) or the Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüs [Islamic Community of Milli Görüs], (IGMG) have in recent years intensified their efforts to give themselves a more modern appearance in order to attract young Muslims of the second and third generations. The ZMD has set up multimedia projects such as the online portal Waymo.de and the online-TV channel Sogesehen.tv in order to target younger Muslims.

The commitment of groups like Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland or of initiatives such as the Arbeitskreis Grüne MuslimInnen [Working Group Green Muslims] von Bündnis90/Die Grünen [Green Party] in the federal state of Nordrhein-Westphalia are indicators that the identification of young Muslims with Germany is increasingly accompanied with the interest to engage in politics and in society as German Muslims. This was reflected most recently during the campaigns for the European and national elections, when Islamic associations campaigned among Muslims to participate more actively in political decision-making processes.

Young Muslims play a leading role in these endeavours. Initiatives in the voluntary sector, as such of the Lifemakers, first surfaced a decade ago. They distinguish themselves as social actors with campaigns to support the homeless, religious consultancy in prisons or in the health sector – often directing their activities to both Muslim and non-Muslim segments of society. In some ways, these initiatives resemble those of Christian currents and organizations. Not coincidentally, these initiatives often see themselves as a counterpart to the Boy Scouts or Christian organizations that combine a religious lifestyle with a service to society.

Muslim youth cultures

Notwithstanding the growing influence of these initiatives, traditional Islamic associations continue to play an important role among young Muslims. The IGMG, for instance, dedicates particular attention to youth work. For this organization, educational activities to create ‘good Muslims’ and to strengthen the

youths' Islamic identity are considered preconditions for a successful integration of Muslims into the German social fabric.¹⁵ By providing religious teaching, homework assistance, and free time activities, the IGMG offers young Muslims manifold opportunities to spend their spare time in accordance with traditional Islamic lifestyles.

However, even within organizations such as the IGMG, a generational shift can be observed. This shift is reflected in a critique of the well-established organizational structures and ideological approaches of these associations. Among younger members of the IGMG, for instance, there are indications of a profound re-orientation, stressing a belonging to German society and distancing themselves from the Turkish-dominated founding generation.¹⁶

This tendency echoes the self-conception of 'pop-Islamic' groupings and initiatives. Here too, the desire for a self-conscious debate around questions of religion and identity is of central importance. Despite the relations, which are maintained by clubs and initiatives such as MJD with established associations like the *Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland* (IGD), they emphasize a commitment to find their own answers to religious questions in the everyday life of young Muslims.

In this regard, the adoption of modern trends of youth culture implies a rapprochement to the non-Islamic surrounding. The popularity of lifestyle labels such as *Style Islam*, which distribute fashionable street wear and accessories with Islamic messages, points to the similarities these youngsters share with their non-Muslim peers. The range of products of such Islamic lifestyle labels does not incidentally include hoodies, mouse pads and coffee mugs for the office. The attraction of this Islamic lifestyle is further boosted through the use of new media. Online communities like *myumma.de* base their web presence on those trends and complement the range of non-religious social networks as *Facebook* and *StudiVZ*. Often young Muslims use both religious and non-religious media.

The fuzziness of the term 'pop-Islam' becomes particularly apparent at the margins of this cultural spectrum. Developments that are familiar from the U.S.-American and British contexts begin to emerge in Germany as well. On the one hand, Islamic youth cultures become increasingly open to mainstream youth cultures, which is observable for instance in the success of the US-Islamic punk band *The Kominas* or the Danish hip-hop band *Outlandish*.¹⁷ On the other hand, the popularity of websites such as *Muslimhiphop.net* indicates the take-

over of pop-cultural elements by radical Islamist movements and groups. The Islamist grouping *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, as for one example, combines modern lifestyle with explicitly Islamist messages.

Despite the popularity of this broadly labelled 'pop-Islamic' current, the Internet is dominated by another current that is committed to an offensive promotion for a rigid interpretation of Islam. Websites like *einladungzumparadies.de* ["invitation to paradise"] or *diewahrheitimherzen.de* ["the truth in the heart"] maintained by this current offer information about Islam and devoted life. The Salafist current of Islam, to which these initiatives belong, claims to follow the example of the *Salaf*, the first generation of Muslims, while rejecting any "innovations" to the original teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunna.¹⁸ Both in appearance, often characterized by the traditional Arabic dress, beards, and sometimes even *niqab*, and in contents of religious instruction, the followers of this current distinguish themselves from associations such as MJD. Yet, through the appearance of their often very charismatic preachers and the organization of public lectures and so-called Islamic seminars in many cities, they have gained a considerable following. What is striking is the ambivalent relationship of these groupings to the non-Islamic context. While proponents of this strand generally emphasize their belonging to German society, simultaneously they define themselves as outsiders, which represent the right path in an infidel environment. The life of the prophet Muhammad is considered here as an example for Muslims living in Germany. After all, Muhammad was initially opposed as a 'stranger' before he was able to prevail with his message vis-à-vis his adversaries. Therefore, the experience of racist hostilities only appears to affirm the withdrawal to the community of Muslims.

The attractiveness of well-defined communities becomes also evident in the popularity of youth cultures in which ethnic identity is emphasized besides Islam. For one, the Turkish-Islamic group *Bozkurtlar* ["The Grey Wolves"] in recent years gained in popularity among Turkish-speaking youth. The linkage of an authoritarian Turkish nationalism with Islamist conceptions of society offers an orientation in which the status of one's own ethnic and religious identity is enhanced vis-à-vis the surrounding social environment. Similar processes of self-ethnicizing can be observed among youth with Albanian, Lebanese or Palestinian family background. Such reference to a supposedly authentic ethnic identity is often related to a gain in status in the adolescents' everyday life.¹⁹ This orientation is reflected in the symbolic expression of this identity in daily life. The displays of national symbols and the often aggressive commitment as

"Albanians" or "Lebanese" through self-composed music and music videos are different forms of expression of this phenomenon.

The variety of options from which young Muslims can choose could be interpreted as an indication for an increasing 'naturalization' of Islam in Germany. Notwithstanding the distinctive features, which characterize the individual currents, there are several parallels and links to trends and styles of non-Islamic youth cultures. As such, these youth cultures – and the increasingly multifaceted phenomenon of Pop-Islam among them – are part and parcel of the German social fabric.

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¹ Julia Gerlach, *Zwischen Pop und Dschihad. Muslimische Jugendliche in Deutschland* [*Between Pop and Jihad. Muslim Youth in Germany*], Berlin 2006.

² Sonja Haug/Stephanie Müssig/Anja Sticks, *Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland. Im Auftrag der Deutschen Islam Konferenz* [*Muslim Life in Germany. On behalf of the German Islam Conference*], Nuremberg 2009, p. 105.

³ Michael Kiefer, „Lebenswelten muslimischer Jugendlicher – eine Typologie von Identitätswürfen“ [*Lebenswelten of Muslim youth – a typology of identity frameworks*], in Harry Harun Behr/Hansjörg Schmid/Mathias Rohe (eds.), *Was soll ich hier? Lebensweltorientierung muslimischer Schülerinnen und Schüler als Herausforderung für den Islamischen Religionsunterricht* [*What am I here for? Orientations of Lebenswelten among Muslim High School Students as Challenge to Islamic Religious Education*], Berlin 2010. 'Fundamentalist' is here not to be understood in the sense of Islamist, i.e. an orientation that aims to Islamicize the society, but rather as a traditionalist-influenced adherence to religious norms and values. A different typology is presented by Hans-Jürgen von Wensierski and Claudia Lübcke in „Hip-Hop, Kopftuch und Familie – Jugendphase und Jugendkulturen junger Muslime in Deutschland“ [*Hip-Hop, Headscarf and Family – Adolescence and youth cultures of young Muslims in Germany*] in Christine Hunner-Kreisel/Sabine Andresen (Hrsg.), *Kindheit und Jugend in muslimischen Lebenswelten*, Wiesbaden 2010, p. 158.

⁴ Dirk Halm, 'Freizeit, Medien und kulturelle Orientierung junger Türkeistämmiger in Deutschland' [*Leisure time, media and cultural orientation among adolescents of Turkish origin in Germany*], in Hans-Jürgen von Wensierski/Claudia Lübcke (Hrsg.) *Junge Muslime in Deut-*

schland. Lebenslagen, Aufwuchsprozesse und Jugendkulturen [Young Muslims in Germany: Circumstances, Processes of Growing-Up and Youth Cultures], Opladen 2007, pp. 108-110.

⁵ Naika Foroutan/Isabel Schäfer, „Hybride Identitäten - muslimische Migrantinnen und Migranten in Deutschland und Europa“ [‘Hybrid identities: Muslim migrants in Germany and Europe’], *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (5/2009), pp. 11-12.

⁶ Katrin Brettfeld/Peter Wetzels, *Muslims in Deutschland: Integration, Integrationsbarrieren, Religion und Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Rechtsstaat und politisch-religiös motivierter Gewalt* [Muslims in Germany: Integration, Obstacles to Integration, Religion and Attitudes towards Democracy, Rule of Law and Politically and Religiously Motivated Violence], Berlin 2007, p. 243.

⁷ Michael Blume, „Islamische Religiosität nach Altersgruppen“ [‘Islamic religiosity according to age groups’], in Bertelsmann-Stiftung (ed.), *Religionsmonitor 2008. Muslimische Religiosität in Deutschland* [Monitor of Religion 2008: Muslim Religiosity in Germany], Gütersloh 2008, p. 44.

⁸ Jörn Thielmann, „Vielfältige muslimische Religiosität in Deutschland“ [‘Muslim religiosity in Germany’], in Bertelsmann-Stiftung, *Religionsmonitor 2008*, p. 16.

⁹ Blume, *ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Cf. Sigrid Nökel, „‘Neo-Muslimas’ – Alltags- und Geschlechterpolitiken junger muslimischer Frauen zwischen Religion, Tradition und Moderne“ [‘Neo-Muslimas’: Everyday and gender politics of young Muslim women between religion, tradition and modernity], in von Wensierski/Lübcke, *Junge Muslime in Deutschland*, pp. 135-154.

¹¹ See Brettfeld/Wetzels, *ibid.*, pp. 236-242, for an example of discriminatory perceptions among Muslims.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 336 and 340.

¹³ For the relationship between religiosity and homophobia among young migrants, cf. to Bernd Simon, "Einstellungen zur Homosexualität: Ausprägungen und psychologische Korrelate bei Jugendlichen mit und ohne Migrationshintergrund (ehemalige UdSSR und Türkei)" [Attitudes towards homosexuality: Characteristics and psychological correlates among youth with and without backgrounds of migration (former Soviet Union and Turkey)], *Zeitschrift für Entwicklungspsychologie und Pädagogische Psychologie*, 40/2008, p. 98.

¹⁴ *The Gallup Coexist Index 2009: A Global Study of Interfaith Relations*, p. 19 and 23.

¹⁵ „‘Großer Bruder, kleiner Bruder’: Islamische Identität in der Kinder- und Jugendarbeit von Milli Görüs“ [‘Big brother, small brother’: Islamic identity in children and youth work of Milli Görüs’], *Newsletter „Jugendkultur, Religion und Demokratie. Politische Bildung mit jungen Musli-*

men" [Newsletter "Youth Culture, Religion and Democracy. Civic education with young Muslims"], No. 11/2009, pp. 5-7.

¹⁶ On developments within the IGMG, cf. to Werner Schiffauer, *After Islamism: An Ethnography of the Islamic Community Milli Görüs*, Berlin 2010. However, the significance of this generational change is disputed among observers of IGMG, cf. to Eberhard Seidel, 'Der Ethnologe und seine Boygroup' [The anthropologist and his boy group], *Die Tageszeitung*, 3 April 2010. The German intelligence agencies doubt a fundamental re-orientation of IGMG.

¹⁷ See the novel of Michael Muhamad Knight, *The Taqwacores*, New York 2004, and to Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam. Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*, New York 2008.

¹⁸ On the influence of salafism on the internet, see Ekkehard Rudolph, 'Salafistische Propaganda im Internet. Eine Analyse von Argumentationsmustern im Spannungsfeld von missionarischem Aktivismus, Islamismus und Gewaltlegitimation' ['Salafist propaganda on the internet: an analysis of patterns of argumentation in the zone of tension between missionary activism, Islamism and legitimation of violence'], in Armin Pfahl-Traughber (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Extremismus- und Terrorismus-Forschung 2009/2010* [Yearbook of Extremism and Terrorism Research on 2009/2010], Brühl 2010, pp. 486-501.

¹⁹ Cf. Kemal Bozay, "... ich bin stolz, Türke zu sein!" *Ethnisierung gesellschaftlicher Konflikte im Zeichen der Globalisierung* ['I am proud to be a Turk!' *Ethnicization of Social Conflicts in the Age of Globalization*], Schwabach/Ts. 2005, and Schule ohne Rassismus – Schule mit Courage (ed.), *Rechtsextremismus in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft. Ex-Jugoslawen. Russlanddeutsche, Türken und Polen* [Right-wing Extremism in the Immigration Society: Former-Yugoslavs, Russian Germans, Turks, and Poles], Berlin 2010.