

Title—Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth Century France

Author—Naomi Davidson

Year—2012

Categories: Islam, Politics, Culture, Colonialism, Migration

Place: France (French Empire)

Time: 1900-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Davidson's book seeks to interrogate the concept of *Islam Français*, or French Islam, which was created in the minds of French people. Davidson reveals that French Islam was a system that blended French secular republicanism with distinct embodied practices and aesthetics drawn from the French imaginary of orthodox Moroccan Islam. She argues that this conception of French Islam saturated North African migrants with an embodied religious identity that functioned as a racialized identity. The argument that "Muslim-ness" was innate and immutable is what made French Islam different from French Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, etc. She aims to provide an explanation of why and how French policy makers and intellectuals racialized Islam and Muslims—as well as exploring of the consequences of the transformation of a 'religious' identity into a racialized identity for immigrants.

Specifically, Davidson is focused on the way the built environment in France informed the construction of this French Islam. She argues that the saturation of Muslims with 'Muslim-ness' informed and was reinforced by French architects' and intellectuals' representations of the 'Muslim' built environment and Muslim religious practices. Davidson uses built environment to refer mostly to the *Grande Mosquée de Paris* (or Paris Mosque), first built in 1926, but also other buildings associated with French Islam. The Paris Mosque is a physical site that reflected but also helped to constitute French perceptions of Islam and Muslim practices. She demonstrates that the racializing French Islam that emerged in the 1920s would ultimately influence not only French state attitudes towards Muslim immigrants, but also self-identification for some of France's diverse Muslim communities. Davidson compares the saturation of Muslims with 'Muslim-ness' against the saturation of women with 'gender' and of colonial people with 'primitivism.'

Davidson organizes the book around her two central arguments. First, she argues that at the moment of its creation, French Islam emerged exclusively out of French perceptions of Orthodox Moroccan Islam, rather than out of the many forms of Islam practiced across North and West Africa. Second, she posits that the saturation of nominally 'Muslim' immigrants from North and West Africa in the colonial and postcolonial metropole was not uniform in spite of the universalizing tendencies of French Islam. The choice to define French Islam as Moroccan signaled an acknowledgement of Morocco's power and prestige, as well as an utter disregard for Algeria and West Africa. It was possible to characterize French Islam as Moroccan precisely because there were so few Moroccans in the metropole. Thus, French imaginings of Moroccan Islam would define what it meant to be Muslim in France—this characterized Muslims as a unified entity. She concludes by noting how the headscarf laws suggest it is no longer possible to practice both 'Muslim-ness' and French-ness, indicating that French Islam may no longer exist as a concept.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The French state treated immigrants from North Africa 'only as Muslims' is that *Islam Français* saturated them with an embodied religious identity that functioned as a racialized identity
- It is more productive to think about 'Muslim' as a category of racial difference rather than one of religious difference
- Central tenet of *Islam Français* is that Muslims could only ever be Muslims