The Muslim Town in France:
Difficulties and Possibilities

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Abstract
The most difficult aspect of the integration of migrants in France is the relationship between Islam and *laïcité*, which refers to the separation of church and state. In recent years, laws have been enacted prohibiting Muslim women from wearing the hijab or headscarf in public schools. In urban spaces, the visibility of Muslims also came into question, when, in the 1990s, collective street prayers began to take place in the Goutte d’Or district of Paris due to a lack of prayer space stemming from the urban renovation project that began in the 1980s. This district was thus strongly recognized as a Muslim town by French society, and it became a target for attacks by segregationist groups, sometimes under the *laïcité* slogan. As such, state law could be viewed as providing justification for the behavior of these groups. However, the city of Paris has sought to resolve the issue by overcoming the barriers of the system through negotiation with local residents. The Muslim town in France can, therefore, be viewed as a space that embodies both the difficulties and possibilities of integrating migrants.

**Key words**: France, Paris, the Goutte d’Or district, Islam, *laïcité*, Prayer on the street

I Introduction

The difficulties of integrating migrants in France has long been known in Japan. Since the 1980s Japanese researchers have recognized the “immigration problem” as a characteristic of France, and the issue became more visible to the general public in the autumn of 2005 during the unrest in the suburbs of France’s larger cities. Initially there was some focus on human-rights-based support, to which Japan did not correspond at all (such as the offer of citizenship to irregular immigrants). However, in recent years, problems caused by cultural differences have attracted more attention. These problems stem from religion and coexistence with Muslims.

Religion might be a greater problem in France than in other European countries due to *laïcité*, the separation of church and state. Not only does the state not protect or exclude any particular religion, but religion is strictly separated from the public sphere. This has generated conflicts with people of immigrant origins and particularly Muslims.

As compared with contemporary Japan, the problem of the French situation is that the state’s position might provide justification to xenophobes for their behavior. In Japan, there are problems with hate crimes in ethnic towns, and such crimes are not unrelated to diplomatic situations between neighboring countries. From this viewpoint, analyzing the current situation of the Muslim town in France can help provide a framework for addressing problems in Japan.
In France, social problems are geographically delineated. The “suburban problems” represented by juvenile delinquency are one example of this. A zone urbaine sensible (ZUS), or urban sensitive zone, is an area with high unemployment, high welfare-benefit households, and a high failure rate for schools. A zone d’éducation prioritaire (ZEP), or educational priority zone, is a relatively poor area subsidized for equality of education for children. France recognizes problems by area, not by social group, and tries to solve them through the relevant local administrations. Hence, it is easy to find ethnic towns with social difficulties in France.

On the other hand, France does not gather statistics on ethnicity, race, or religion, which makes it difficult to identify areas with specific ethnic groups. Following the principles of the French republic, which tie individuals to the state and deny intermediary bodies, ethnic statistics are not used so as to avoid discrimination. The gathering of such statistics also reminds people of anti-Semitism during World War II. Therefore, a Muslim town would only be inferred by the number of migrants from countries with a Muslim majority.

The existence of mosques could indicate the existence of a Muslim community, but a visibly apparent mosque might not necessarily be situated in an area with a Muslim majority. According to Tastevin (2011), there is no distinctive mosque in Seine Saint-Denis, which is believed to have the largest Muslim population in France. On the other hand, in times of conflict, a district could be strongly regarded as a Muslim town. Whatever the real situation, an association of Muslims with the district could sometimes provide a target of attack.

After providing an overview of the general situation of immigration and Muslim citizens in France, I will examine the Goutte d’Or district of Paris as an example of a Muslim town. It has a history of receiving migrants since the beginning of urbanization, but in recent years its relationship with Muslims has been strongly recognized. The urban renovation project, which has lasted around 30 years in the district, is related to that situation. This paper shows the situation of a Muslim town, which continues to be seen as unique in French society, and the realities of its related conflicts.

II Immigration in France and Islam

In the long history of immigration in France, the movement related to current conflicts dates back to the period after World War II. Postwar reconstruction and the subsequent economic boom caused a shortage in the labor force, and France accepted migrants from both European and non-European countries. In particular, many workers came from Algeria. The migration was too rapid, and facilities such as housing were inadequate. Migrant workers began to create shantytowns called bidonvilles on the fringes of the larger cities.

The situation led to dissatisfaction on the part of both the host society and the migrant workers. Thränhardt (1992) points out that European countries stopped accepting migrants during the oil shocks of the 1970s, not only because of the depression but also because of the rise of demands for workers’ rights. France stopped admitting new migrant workers in 1974. For existing migrants, France adopted a policy that encouraged them to return to their native countries.

Most, however, did not return and instead brought their families to settle in France. Children born in France received citizenship as a result of the jus soli (Latin: right of the soil) slant of French nationality law. In addition, migrants from newly independent sub-Saharan countries came to look for jobs in France. This was after France suspended accepting new migrants, so they had
to work under poor conditions and lead unstable lives. Thus, France came to have large internal ethnic communities (Table 1).

As migrant settlement progressed, France searched for ways to socially integrate these populations. Many of the cultural aspects of the migrant populations, especially their religious demands, have baffled French society. The basis for France’s strict secularism policy, or laïcité, is the 1905 law separating church and state, which is now written in the Constitution. The law was intended to enforce the polity of the republic by eliminating the power of the Catholic Church, which had great social influence, from the educational sphere and from the political domain. By adopting this policy, France could not establish religious political parties (as in Germany) nor have religious classes in public education (as in the Netherlands).

In France today, however, the only religion discussed in relation to laïcité is Islam. It began with the “scarf affair,” in which junior high girls were expelled for refusing to remove their headscarves in school in 1989. The principal of the school, who later became a politician, judged them unacceptable in a place of public education based on the principle of laïcité. At that time, when students in other European countries wore religious symbols or clothing, it was not regarded as a problem related to secularism. But with the concept of laïcité, the state could restrict religious signs or behaviors in public places. The students’ clothes were for the school principal a violation of the republican principle of laïcité.

Much discussion followed. Was it possible to wear the headscarf if it was not an “ostentatious” display? Did this strict application of laïcité adversely affect education? Some advocated protecting the will of the students. However, after several controversies, the conclusion of French society in 2004 was total prohibition of scarves and veils in public schools. The tendency to view advocating Islam as political behavior following 9/11 influenced the situation. The law forbids students from wearing visible religious symbols, including a large cross or a kippah, but in practice, it targets Muslims. Furthermore, in 2010 a law banning face covering in public places was established. This also included full-face helmets, but again the targets were Islamic burqas and niqabs. These movements influenced other parts of Europe, and similar laws were established in other countries.

Some have commented that the recent trends in France are not necessarily related to laïcité but Islamophobia or racism (Naito and Sakaguchi 2007, Scott 2010). Muslim migrants and their descendants are mainly from former French colonies. Historically, the French treated people who obeyed Islamic law as subjects and did not offer citizenship in Algeria before World War II (Matsunuma 2012). In this light, current laws and rules targeting Islam could be seen as reflecting

| Table 1. Number of migrants in France according to national origins (2008) |
|------------------|------------------|---|
|                  | Migrant Population | %  |
| Europe           | 2,032,021         | 38.0 |
| Spain            | 257,315           | 4.8 |
| Italy            | 317,260           | 5.9 |
| Portugal         | 580,598           | 10.9 |
| United Kingdom   | 147,954           | 2.8 |
| Other EU countries | 505,296         | 9.5 |
| Non-EU countries in Europe | 223,596 | 4.2 |
| Africa           | 2,271,231         | 42.5 |
| Algeria          | 713,334           | 13.4 |
| Morocco          | 653,826           | 12.2 |
| Tunisia          | 234,669           | 4.4 |
| Other countries in Africa | 669,401 | 12.5 |
| Asia             | 756,846           | 14.2 |
| Turkey           | 238,862           | 4.5 |
| Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam | 162,684 | 3.0 |
| Other countries in Asia | 355,301 | 6.7 |
| America, Oceania | 282,191           | 5.3 |
| Total            | 5,342,288         | 100.0 |

Source: http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?ref_id=T12F037

3. to work under poor conditions and lead unstable lives. Thus, France came to have large internal ethnic communities (Table 1).
Given these circumstances, the relationship between laïcité and Islam has again been in question regarding the use of urban space in the capital. In the next section, the situation of the Goutte d’Or district from its urbanization to the present day as a migrant neighborhood will be considered.

III Urbanization and Redevelopment of the Goutte d’Or

The Goutte d’Or district is situated in the 18th arrondissement of Paris in the northern part of the city. Meaning “golden drop,” the district was named after the wine that was produced in the district. The land was developed during the first half of the nineteenth century as a residential area for workers in railway-related factories (Bacqué and Fijalkow 2006) and was incorporated into the city of Paris in 1860 by Haussmann’s urban renovation during the Second Empire period. From the beginning of urbanization, this district accepted people who moved into the city via industrialization.

Although working-class people were concentrated in this area, the Goutte d’Or was not considered especially problematic, and there was no need to politicize the neighborhood. However, during the second half of the twentieth century, the situation changed completely as the migrant district rapidly developed. After World War II, there was an increase in rooms available in the apartments for the purpose of escaping rent control and a rise in “furnished hotels.” This caused migrants to choose the Goutte d’Or as a living area (Bacqué and Fijalkow 2006). The district became well known to migrants, and the nearest metro station, Barbès, was the place name on which new migrants often relied when coming to Paris.

By the 1970s, the area was seen as strongly connected with migrant workers. Intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault expressed solidarity with the workers during that time. However, the area was also characterized as a place of drug trafficking and prostitution, and the city administration recognized the need for intervention. The city of Paris started developing an urban planning project in 1977, which was eventually launched in the southern part of the district in 1985. The northern part was developed in the 1990s. As such, the entire district has been a construction site for nearly 30 years.

The official reason for the urban planning project was poor hygiene. More than 80 percent of the housing in the Goutte d’Or was determined to be unhygienic (Office public d’habitation de la Ville de Paris 1988). However, Bacqué and Fijalkow (2006) point out that the district had been considered a “ghetto,” and the hygiene issue was a pretext for intervention. The ideology of sanitization has been one of the main guidelines of French urban planning since the nineteenth century, and the use of statistical indicators has made it possible to select and exclude socially fragile residents (Fijalkow 1998).

In addition, the Goutte d’Or was designated as an “urban sensitive zone” in 1984 (Mairie de Paris 2011). This means the district became a target of concentrated support and management on both local and national levels. As discussed above, in French politics, social problems are delineated geographically by areas, not by social groups. While the refusal to use ethnic statistics is intended to avoid discrimination, this approach can make the existence of ethnic discrimination invisible.

French society views the Goutte d’Or not only in terms of aging buildings and impoverished
residents but also of specific migrant groups. Michel Tournier’s 1985 novel La Goutte d’Or, for example, depicts a Berber boy from the Saharan oasis who comes to Paris and finds himself in the district. The title does not refer to a place but to a pendant in the shape of a golden drop. However, the author uses the names of streets and neighboring institutions in the district, and readers recognize it as a migrant district. In addition, in the 1991 comedy film La Totale! (Total Disaster), the main character, who works as a government intelligence officer, is caught by an enemy. He is taken to various places by his captors before being confined to a place that seems to resemble the Middle East. When he finally escapes, he realizes he is still on the streets of Paris and notices he is in “Barbès.” The district is thus depicted as a center of evil.

Jacques Chirac, mayor of Paris at the inception of the urban development projects in the Goutte d’Or, showed clear prejudice and aroused criticism. In a speech at Orléans on June 19, 1991, he said the following:

> Our problem, it is not foreigners, it is that there is an overdose....The worker who lives in the Goutte d’Or, who works with his wife to earn about 15,000 francs, and who sees on the same floor of his social residence, a family piled with the father of the family, three or four spouses, and about twenty kids, who gets 50,000 francs of social benefits without working naturally !...If you add to it the noise and the smell, the French worker on the same floor becomes mad. (Le Monde, June 21, 1991)

People opposed to large-scale renovation made an effort to change the district’s image. One idea was to diffuse the image-not of a fluid migrant district but a stable, familial “village” (Fijalkow 2007). Architects insisted on making use of the historical faubourg character of the district — that is, a residential area of working-class people on the city’s outskirts (Breitman and Culot 1988). Many Catholic support groups criticized the project. The administration could not ignore them. It founded the Saint-Bruno room, which functioned as a center of information for residents and civic groups. However, as Bacqué (2006) points out, the administration partially acquiesced to the criticism because it helped it avoid attacks on the project. In reality, despite the long-running operation of the urban planning project in this district, there is no apparent opposition to it now.

As a result of this project, there are now some completely renovated streets. In the new buildings, some apartments are provided to house police officers, and there is no doubt that the changes have had some impact on the configuration of residents. Still, there is a large migrant population as evidenced by the concentration of grocery and clothing stores in the district for people from North and sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, a new development in the Goutte d’Or in the 1990s “shocked” French society: Muslim worship on the street.

IV The Question of Worship on the Street

Beginning in the 1990s, Muslims could be seen gathering to pray on the street in the Goutte d’Or (Figure 1). They could not ensure enough space for collective worship on Fridays, so they prayed on the streets around small mosques. Calls for prayer were announced through loudspeakers from the mosques, and the worshippers would arrange plastic sheets or carpets on the roads to pray together. This had an important impact on French society and was reported as a “visualization of Islam.”

This practice created a sensation only after the images were seen by the public, but the lack of space for worship began at an earlier time. Tastevin (2011) investigated the background of
this situation in detail. Muslims who had at first prayed individually began to organize collective worship in the gathering rooms of *foyer*\textsuperscript{s}, in rooms borrowed from Catholic churches, factories, and other temporary spaces. Moussa Diakité of the Al-fath mosque created a small prayer room on Léon Street in 1972 and borrowed a larger basement for prayer on Polonceau Street in 1975. He collected funds to borrow the entire building to be used as a mosque. He purchased it in 1982 with a donation from a wealthy entrepreneur he encountered en route to Mecca.

However, the building was judged unhygienic during the urban renovation project. The administration could not easily destroy the mosque, which was run by an association, and a new place was needed. In 1996, the city began to construct a temporary building next to the mosque. In the meantime, they created a passage from the street to the basement of the old building that was supposed to be destroyed. This was the beginning of praying on the streets. People who came to the mosque soon accepted the situation and started to pray around it. In 2002, the police, the mosque, and the residents in the vicinity reached a consensus regarding the securing of the sidewalk. But in 2006, in response to the destruction of the mosque in the 19th arrondissement, the number of worshippers increased dramatically. According to Tastevin (2011), this situation highlights the problem of the urban planning project not being able to offer a substitute place for prayer.\textsuperscript{12}

The city of Paris did not ignore the situation. Having a left-wing government since 2001, the city created an *Institut des Cultures d'Islam* (*ICI*), or Institution of Islamic Cultures. This was built in the Goutte d’Or in 2006. Using the plural form of *cultures* suggests a desire to avoid a one-sided view of Islam, especially the prejudicial kind that arose after 9/11. The ICI organized exhibitions of traditional and contemporary arts and tried to relieve the intense impressions of the Muslim town, which had developed in French society from the 1990s\textsuperscript{13}.

The ICI, which is housed in a temporary building, will move to two permanent buildings that are under construction. The building on Stephenson Street will be completed in 2014. The other will be constructed on Polonceau Street on the site of the temporary mosque described above. In each building — in addition to a research center, event spaces, hammams, and a tea salon — there will be worship rooms. Because *laïcité* forbids the administration from providing funds for a particular religion, the worship rooms will be built with private funds through the *Association des Musulmans de l'Ouverture* (*AMO*), or Association of Muslims of Openness. For the worship room on Stephenson Street, there is an agreement with the Paris Mosque of the 5th arrondissement for a donation. For the other, they are still looking for funding.

An article in the *Parisien* from March 10, 2009, titled “Finally two mosques which deserve this name” discusses the novelty of the project in solving the problem of prayer on the street with respect to *laïcité*. It touches on the question that the space might not be adequate, but regardless, the city’s effort to solve the problem was understandable to readers. However, before the buildings were completed, the situation would change, as I will discuss in the next section.

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V  Muslim Town Attacked

Public prayer in the streets of the Goutte d’Or had caused controversy, and for groups of segregationists, it was a target of attack. Videos of the worshippers were posted on the Internet accompanied by discriminatory language, and there were websites that blamed the attitude of the police. The reasoning for limiting the public display of worship was laïcité. In other words, the concept enshrined by the state was used to justify discriminatory behavior.

In May 2010, a group called Riposte Laïque (RL), or Reply of Laïcité, along with the Bloc Identitaire, or Identity Block, organized an aperitif with “salami and cheap wine” (the title of the event) in the Goutte d’Or and invited people to participate through Facebook. It was a provocation to Muslims who are forbidden to eat pork or drink alcohol. The organizers wanted to oppose prayer on the street with an event in which Muslims could not participate. Antiracist groups such as SOS Racisme immediately demanded that the event be stopped, and the media reported on the situation as it developed. The event, which had been planned for June 18, 2010, was eventually banned on June 15.

The event attracted controversy because it would not have been problematic if carried out elsewhere. It was evidently a contemptuous act that opposed the Muslim occupation of streets, and it used Islamic precepts in an underhanded way; however, there was no physical violence. Prayer on the street was clearly not a good situation for anyone, including Muslim residents.

An article in Le Monde from June 9, 2010, describing the event as an act of the far right generated 262 comments. The first one is already suggestive: “Isn’t it possible to condemn them for racial discrimination with the reference to salami?” (Will, June 9, 2010, 20:03). The form of the negative question suggests that some sensitivity is needed for this discussion. Even if Muslims are prohibited from eating pork, eating salami is a daily dietary habit in France. Another reply suggests, “It is like any other public place in France, places under the aegis of the Republic, and nothing would have to be banned there which does not contravene its laws” (Demos, June 10, 2010, 7:20). This implies that street worship should be banned. It is difficult to explain from a legal standpoint why the worship should be permitted and the aperitif banned. However, as described earlier, situations occur within specific contexts. Comparing worship with an aperitif already shows a lack of understanding about the circumstances of the district.

Salami and wine are not just ordinary consumables. They convey a touristic image of France. Among the comments, words like beret and baguette are used in similar ways. Also, some comments discuss salami and wine as agricultural products with a relation to the terre (land) and terroir (land). Pointing out traditions or indigenous features emphasizes that Muslim worship is a custom “brought from outside.” This thinking is summarized in the following comment: “Bravo for this initiative, which perhaps lets the district be more “proper” than it is usual” (LEGRAND, June 9, 2010, 22:24).

There were, of course, criticisms of such an initiative: “You should stop freaking out like this, the French so-called ‘pure stock’” (Etienne, June 9, 2010, 23:13) and “Yes for kosher and halal. Yes for full veil and kippah. For the name of the liberty of ones. No, no, and no for pork, meat, and wine. No for beret and baskets. For the name of the provocation of others” (COULON, June 9, 2010, 22:36). It is pointed out in the comments that the French are a mixed people with various origins from earlier periods, and they should respectfully protect the freedoms of other people. The people who were clearly against the event often mentioned World War II, saying that
permitting such an event allowed for the rise of far-right groups.

But some displayed little patience: “These French people, even they are clearly the stock or descendants of European immigration of a more or less near period, and they are simply tired of seeing this country become dirty because of the non-action of Parisian elites — even those in the government or the media” (Homère, June 9, 2010, 23:45). Some did little to hide their xenophobia, saying that accepting the other is elitism. While it is impossible to know the extent to which these opinions are representative of French society (nor is it possible to simply compare the numbers for and against), the event clearly had the effect of bringing pent-up dissatisfaction to the surface.

In December of the same year, Marine Le Pen, president of the far-right National Front, aroused criticism by comparing street prayer in the Goutte d’Or with the Nazi occupation of France. In July 2011, deputies of the right wing organized an aperitif with salami and red wine in parliament to celebrate their national holiday, Bastille Day, in a “dignified way.” This action clearly suggests a stance similar to that of the RL.

In September 2011, the police totally banned prayer on the street in agreement with the mosques. The city provided an old military barracks as an alternative space, situated about 15 minutes from the district. Street prayer is no longer seen on Fridays in the district. It has become invisible. There was a report suggesting the prayer on the street was a question of place and not threat, but this reveals a fear of the invasion of Islam in French society.

It should be noted that the administration built trust through discussion to respond to local demands. But the necessity for a place of prayer had been evident for about 20 years. It is hard to deny that the influence of segregationist groups lingered in the background of this offer. If these groups lose their favorite target, they do not come to accept Islam. The offer of a temporary mosque can be viewed as a response to local demands, but for society, does it serve only to avert criticism? Could it not be an act to promote a better understanding of the Muslim town?

VI Conclusion

France has the largest Muslim population in Europe, estimated at about four million people. Many are migrants and the descendants of migrants. It is said that the acceptance of immigration and laïcité are in conflict with each other. Currently, there are discussions about wearing headscarves in the universities. It is clear that in French society, a number of people do not want to “see” Islam.

Mosques in the suburbs of the large cities are sometimes defaced. In February 2013, a swastika was painted on the wall of a mosque in Seine et Marne. This reveals the existence of segregationists. Their numbers might be small, but they are clearly rigid in their outlook.

The case of the Goutte d’Or shows that the perception of a place as a “Muslim town” could create a target for segregationists. While this is a difficult problem for French society, there are, more importantly, local activities aimed at finding practical solutions in the Muslim town. The agreement to permit prayer on the street and the construction of the ICI are concrete examples of such efforts. This might not quickly solve the problem, but there is a possibility for creating a new movement. Muslim towns in France could be, despite the many misunderstandings and disagreements, places for experiments in changing society through activities that reflect real sensibilities based on the realities of situations.
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Notes

1. For this idea, I owe much to Prof. Miyajima and his research group Migrants and Society.
2. A report says that 75,000 people lived in bidonvilles in 1966. (Bernardot, 1999, p. 43)
3. The regularization of irregular migrants occurred under the left-wing government of Mitterrand and in the 1990s after the occupation of Saint Bernard church, which is situated in the Goutte d’Or. Activity demanding regularization continues to the present day.
4. For the situation of this change, see Host (2004).
5. This section is a summary of the article by Aramata (2013).
6. Furnished hotels are simple hostels rented by the day, week, or month. These flourished in the nineteenth century, and while the number has decreased in Paris, in the 18th arrondissement there were more than 120 in 2007 (APUR 2007).
7. In France, immigration is an urban question: 37% of migrants live in the Île-de-France (greater Paris area), and 66% live in cities with more than 100,000 people (INSEE 2005). There are 751 zones in the entire country under the existing system (http://www.ville.gouv.fr. Last accessed August 22, 2013).
8. Improving the hygiene of the district is also a demand of the migrant residents. Kalff and Lemaitre (2008) remark that there was a collective demand by residents here, which can be compared with the nineteenth century. The operation was not necessarily a simple exclusion but functioned as a system of capture and selection of residents. About the recent operation, see Aramata (2009).
10. Barthélémy et al. (2007) point out that the rise in the cost of land can be said to be related to the urban planning project until 1997 and is not clear afterwards.
11. A foyer is a type of residence constructed to diminish bidonvilles and receive single migrant workers. There were 46 in Paris in 2006.
12. According to interviews the author conducted in the district in September 2012, the destruction of foyers during the urban renovation project accelerated the lack of places for prayer.
13. The photograph, figure 1 was taken for a program of the ICI with the cooperation of the photographer.

References


