CHAPTER 3

Muslims in Denmark

The earliest official statistics we have on Muslims in Denmark is from a census in 1880 where just eight were counted: six women and two men (Jacobsen 2011), a number that rose significantly when Denmark joined the European-wide search for migrant labor in the late 1960s. Approximately 2,000 Muslims had arrived by 1968, many of whom belonged to the Ahmadi community which built Denmark’s first mosque in 1967 (Nielsen and Otterbeck 2016: 84). This community included a significant number of converts, one of whom, Abdul Salam Madsen, made the first translation of the Quran into Danish in 1967, which was the only one available until three new translations were published in response to rising demand in 2006, 2014, and 2015 (Westh 2017). Immigration was almost unrestricted until 1973 when a new law put a full stop to labor migration while continuing to allow family reunification (Nielsen and Otterbeck 2016: 84). By 1980 there were around 29,400 Muslims in Denmark, but this number rose to approximately 256,000 Muslims by 2020, making up 4.4% of the population (Jacobsen and Vinding 2020).2

Whereas early migrants arrived in search of labor, later migration was dominated by refugees and family reunifications. The demographic composition of the Muslim population in Denmark represents around 60 nationalities and no minority makes up more than 9% of the population with the exception of Turks and Syrians who make up 18.8% and 11.8%, respectively (Jacobsen 2007; Jacobsen and Vinding 2019: 206–207). In other words, the Muslim population in Denmark is very diverse, maybe even hyper diverse as Garbi Schmidt (2009: 42) argues with reference to Steven Vertovec (1996) and his analysis of the difficulty of formulating policies that take this diversity into account.

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1 Of course, Islam had already arrived in Denmark long before. The production of ideas about Islam can be found as early as the era of the Vikings (Kleingärtner and Williams 2013; Simonsen 1990). Some Vikings even seem to have converted to Islam (Sorgenfrei 2018). Although very small, the presence of Muslims, or discourses relating to Islam, in Scandinavia seems continuous until the present day (Jacobsen 2011; Schmidt 2021; Sorgenfrei 2019, 2021). The production of Islam after the Viking era and prior to the 1960s can be summed up in two major trends: a discourse drawing from Christian polemics and an Orientalist discourse exploring an imagined original Islam.

2 These two numbers are calculated in different ways as Brian Arly Jacobsen, due to the availability of a better data set in 2019, changed the calculation method (Jacobsen and Vinding 2020).
The vast majority of people engaged in the Mariam Mosque are children of Muslim immigrants who arrived in Denmark at some point after the late 1960’s. Thus, they constitute the first generation of Muslims born and raised in Denmark as a religious minority. A few members are converts, such as Saliha Marie Fetteh, but their life stories are often intertwined with migration history as their becoming Muslim is the outcome of interaction with Muslims living in Denmark.

1 Strategy and Tactics

Inspired by Michel de Certeau’s (2011) distinction between strategies and tactics, Linda Woodhead (2016) develops the idea of tactical as opposed to strategic religion. In short, religious institutions employ strategies whereas individual believers employ tactics in their everyday lived religion (Woodhead 2016: 15–20). Strategic religion controls time, administers ritual performances, defines religious knowledge in some knowledge spaces, and attempts to discipline the individual into correct practice. Strategic religion is characterized by its holding believers accountable for their private beliefs if they choose to utter these in public.

While strategy may also be seen as a technological power that disciplines the individual (Foucault 1991), de Certeau understands it as a structure within which the individual navigates, noting that, “the space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power … [a tactic] is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision,’ as von Bülow puts it” (Certeau 2011: 37). Strategy and tactics metaphorically describe the form power takes depending on strength: the strong employ strategy while a “tactic is an art of the weak” (Certeau 2011: 37).

However, de Certeau cautions scholars not to assume that all relations between the stronger and the weaker are conflictual or competitive as this analytical framework may significantly distort how informants understand power dynamics (Certeau 2011: 24–25; cf. Abu-Lughod 1990). Studies have demonstrated that individual believers maneuver and may even outmaneuver strategic religion when they practice their everyday lived religion, sometimes within an institutional framework that exerts strategic power (Heelas et al. 2005; Jeldtoft 2011; McGuire 2008; Otterbeck 2010).

Although Islam is often reified as a unit in Danish media and politics, productions of Islams in Denmark are developed in relation to a number of different agents exercising strategic power, among them the Danish state, for-
eign states, media, and Muslim institutions, although the latter merely exercise strategic power within the confines of the national communities to which they belong. For that reason Muslim communities have also been unable to form a proper representative body or respond to journalists and politicians as a group, even when they are under severe pressure to do so (Kühle and Larsen 2017: 79–81).

2 Islamic Institutions in Denmark

In 1990, the first partial mapping of mosques in Denmark demonstrated that these were segregated along denominational and national lines (Simonsen 1990). Two later mappings in 2006 and 2017 demonstrate that this is still the case, but to a lesser degree (Kühle 2006; Kühle and Larsen 2017).

In 2017 there were approximately 170 mosques in Denmark, and their composition reflects the high demographic diversity of Muslims. Of these, the Mariam Mosque belongs to a group of just four mosques that does not follow the pattern of denominational and national segregation; instead, these four mosques have highly diverse congregations. The most common location for mosques in Denmark is old industrial buildings and apartments, and thus the location of the Mariam Mosque is normal in a Danish context. In 2021, only nine mosques in Denmark were purpose built and merely four of them had minarets (Jensen and Petersen 2022).

The latest mapping project also concluded that while some mosques are funded by foreign states or transnational organizations, the majority of mosques in Denmark reflect a typical way of organizing in associations (foreninger), which means that they have members that fund them with regular contributions (Kühle and Larsen 2017: 50), although many mosques are struggling economically and cannot afford to pay salaries. Only around 33% of Sunni imams in Denmark receive a salary and the majority of these are Turkish imams paid for by Diyanet. This means that most Danish Sunni imams are volunteers who perform this role in their spare time and only around 70% of Sunni mosques have an imam with some form of religious education (Kühle and Larsen 2017: 52–54).

3 Kühle and Larsen’s list includes a “mosque” called Musallah situated in a shopping mall, which I have excluded because I consider it a musallah (prayer room). This also fits the description given by Kühle and Larsen: they explain that it is a room made available by the shopping mall and it therefore has no board or organization behind it (Kühle and Larsen 2017: 45). An imam leads the daily prayers for around 50–100 people, but no Friday prayer is held in this musallah.
In other words, the Mariam Mosque, which is an association that does not pay salaries but relies on volunteers, resemble other Danish mosques in terms of organizational structure, economy, location, and it being run by volunteers. The pop-up feature may be seen as different but because other mosques in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden have also existed as pop-up mosques before becoming permanent (Petersen 2019b) this should not be overstated.

3 Danish Born Muslims’ Producing Islam

Out of 55,000 Muslim children between 5–18 years of age in 2012, approximately 4,000 attended Muslim private schools and 6,300 attended Islam classes in a mosque in any given week (Bisbjerg 2011: 41–42; Nielsen and Otterbeck 2016: 88). As the latter number is a mere snapshot of attendance, the accumulated number of children receiving religious instruction is likely to be much higher.

With the exception of Khankan and the converts, almost all other members of the Mariam Mosque who are descendants of Muslim parents have attended either a Muslim private school or a mosque where they received religious instruction. However, none of them internalized the teachings as intended by their teachers; instead they employed tactics, which, according to Woodhead, is a general pattern:

Many second- and third-generation European Muslims are skeptical about the religious authority of parents and mosque leaders. Instead, they turn directly to the Quran, which they interpret for themselves, perhaps in dialogue with peers, and charismatic preachers whom they find to be authentic. The primary intention is a tactical one: to appropriate religious truth in a way which can make sense of “my” life, and “my” identity—a process which some have described as an “individualisation” of Islam ...

WOODHEAD 2016: 18

In his study of “nine young Muslims who do not invest all their time or social prestige in being as though through Muslims as possible” Jonas Otterbeck (2010: 15) demonstrates how his Danish and Swedish informants’ Islam is grounded in their everyday lives and identity formation. Thus, the young peoples’ Islams are produced in the present context, and while it may be inspired and affected by older generations’ Islams, it is significantly different at the same time. This pattern has also been found by Garbi Schmidt (2007) who in her study of Muslim youth movements in Denmark explains that her informants were unhappy
with the Islams preached in the mosques founded by their parents’ generation, mostly because it was not meaningful or practical to them. In his study of Islamic history, Richard W. Bulliet (1994: 183) remarks that “what makes the question-and-answer motif distinctive in Islamic religious history is the variability over time of the parties deemed capable of answering questions authoritatively”. It would seem, based on Otterbeck’s and Schmidt’s studies (and my own study as presented in later chapters) that a significant variable in relation to obtaining the authority to answer questions on Islam is based on what answers one gives: these must be meaningful and practical.

Muslim teachers may employ strategies such as religious instruction to transmit their Islam from one generation to the next but, as Woodhead remarks, students may tactically produce an Islam that is meaningful to themselves and only partially in continuity with the Islam they have been taught. This simultaneous continuity and rupture became more evident when the first generation of Muslims, who had grown up in Denmark, started to found youth organizations, as these constituted religious spaces that were less structured by the strategic Islams of established mosques (Schmidt 2007).

4 Youth Organizations

While the religious instruction provided in the abovementioned institutions can be seen as an attempt to secure continuity of religious practice after migration, descendants began to found their own organizations starting in the late 1980s (Schmidt 2009). More youth organizations had been established by the turn of the century which, despite their not having more than approximately 1,000 members between them, were still significant in that at an early stage they became representatives of Islam in Danish media and many contemporary Muslim leaders, including Sherin Khan, started their career in them (Schmidt 2007: 50).

In 2001, Khan, together with Henrik Plaschke, an associate professor at Aalborg University, founded Forum for Critical Muslims (Forum for Kritiske Muslimer), which encouraged “Danish secularly oriented Muslims” to engage in public debate and argue against both monolithic representations of Muslims in Danish media and “Danish Muslims who neither accept diversity nor secularity”:

Only God has the right to enunciate definite truths. The rest is interpretation, and Islam does not give us an indication of different interpretations’ correctness. The imam’s answer is merely one interpretation among many.
possibilities, and it should be evaluated on equal terms with these. Thus, the criteria for this evaluation becomes important, and they cannot be just theological. Other forms of knowledge must be included on equal terms with religious knowledge.

Khankan and Plaschke 2001

While Forum for Critical Muslims, like any other youth organization, had its unique characteristics, it resembled most other groups in that it propelled its leadership into public debate, and it created a forum for discussion and practice of Islam that was not, or only partially, structured by strategic religion. This is also evident in the quote above where the imam’s interpretation is reduced to one among many possibilities, all equally valid.

The youth organizations neither rebelled against nor made a clean break with strategic religion (Schmidt 2007). They were a consequence of tactics employed by young people who would still attend rituals such as Friday prayer in the established mosques. This pattern is repeated among some congregants of the Mariam Mosque who regularly attend Friday prayer in other mosques but also complain about the content of the Friday sermons and the rules, or strategies, that regulate these mosque spaces. That is, they were looking for an alternative mosque space and that is their reason for coming to the Mariam Mosque.

5 Women’s Authority and Possible Role as Imams

Aminah Tønnsen, a Danish convert and autodidact religious authority who has written several books on Islam, suggested female imams in a piece published on 10 January 2003 in Weekendavisen, titled “Why not female imams?”:

According to Abu Dawood, the Prophet Mohammad allegedly appointed an older Meccan woman, Umm Waraqa, to lead the prayer for her own house, both for women and men ... Around the country Muslim women teach and lead prayer for small groups of women. I am sure that there are some among them that will be capable of leading the prayer and delivering the Friday sermon in a responsible way for a larger congregation of women—and men for that matter. In most mosques in the country, women have separate prayer rooms, which are connected with the imam in the men’s prayer room via a loudspeaker. So, a female imam would not risk disturbing the men’s ability to concentrate. In fact, nothing more is required than installing loudspeakers that work the other way around!
But in order not to shock them too much, women could start by just holding their own Friday prayer. It cannot be that hard just to push the off-button on the loudspeakers. I am sure that a new kind of Friday sermon will come along that is so exciting that the men, when the initial fright has settled, will become curious and want to listen in.

Tønnsen 2003

By suggesting that women should “push the off-button on the loudspeakers” Tønnsen challenges strategic religion in the space where it is strongest. She breaches what Alberto Melucci (1996a: 24) calls the “the limits of compatibility of the social system of relationships within which the action takes place”,4 which he defines “as the range of variability in the systemic states that enables a system to maintain its structure” (Melucci 1996a: 24). Tønnsen is not suggesting a tactic but a rebellion: that the weak through collective social action play the role of the powerful and employ a strategy that will alter the space which is currently structured by the strategy that bans women from delivering the Friday sermon. To employ strategy is what social movements are made of, but this is a fundamentally different type of struggle than the tactics employed by the youth organizations.

A year earlier, on 14 January 2002, Khankan had already published an article called “Female imams wanted”, in which she argued for the legitimacy of female imams and her youth organization, Forum for Critical Muslims, later published a manifest in 2006 which suggested Friday prayer with a khatiba (female Friday preacher) who would deliver the Friday sermon to a mixed gender congregation and then lead prayer for the women while a male imam led the prayer for men (Khankan 2002c; Khankan et al. 2006). Both ideas remained unrealized.

Tønnsen’s opinion piece demonstrates that Khankan was not the only Muslim who envisioned female imams. Rather, the two abovementioned opinion pieces by Tønnsen and Khankan imply the emerging demand for female imams among a segment of Danish Muslims—a demand that is also implied in polls. In 2008 Catinét Research (2009: 71–72) asked refugees and immigrants from Turkey, Pakistan, former Yugoslavia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Lebanon (refugees with Palestinian origin), “What do you think about the idea of a female imam?”. The result divided the respondents into three groups of equal size: 29% in favor, 27% neither in favor nor opposed to the idea, and 28% opposed. Catinét Research’s poll is rather simple, and it is unclear what exactly is meant by a

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4 Emphasis is in the original.
female imam. One interpretation may be that it means a female equivalent to the male imam, but another interpretation is suggested by Kühle and Larsen’s (2017) observation that in some Bosnian and Turkish mosques female teachers were sometimes addressed as imams. That is, female imam can also be interpreted as an *ustadha* (female teacher).

This chapter has demonstrated the ruptures between the Islam of Muslim immigrants and descendants, analysed as emerging demands catered to by youth organizations, among others’ Khankans Forum for Critical Muslims. In Chapter 5 I will elaborate on the emergence of the specific demand for female imams, but before that, I will introduce Khankan in Chapter 4 as one of the main drivers behind the emergence of the Mariam Mosque.