

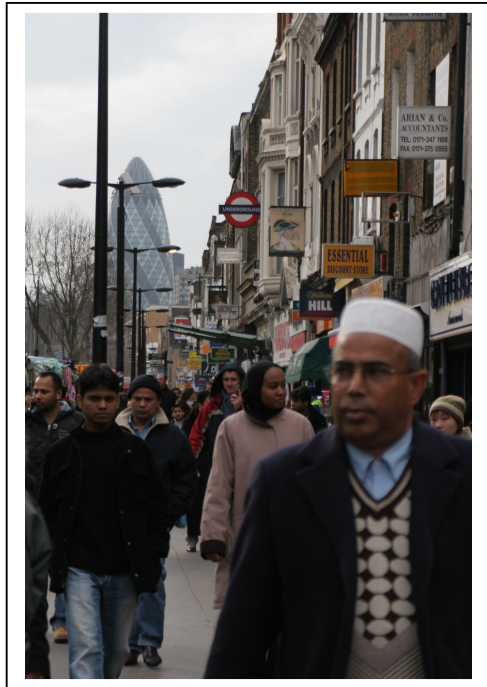
# Local politic and Muslim identity in Tower Hamlet

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The of aim this paper to look at the Muslim community of East London (Tower Hamlets), and the ways available for them to participate in the British political system. For example an increasing desire in the recent years among British Muslims for greater visibility in the British political arena has had impact in the way local politics is represented. George Galloway's campaigning in the 2005 election is a case in point.

Local identity is an important factor within such developments. Therefore this paper also tries to examine both visually and textually local identity in Tower Hamlets and how recent migrations and political development have affected this borough. It will show through visual material, how the Islamic and Asian character of the borough can be seen in physical representations.

Tower Hamlets has a long tradition of immigrant populations from all over the world, including Huguenots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today a significant number of the residents in Tower Hamlets are Bangladeshi Muslims, (Eade, 1997:146), but the community has a popular image for multiculturalism, and especially in terms of the more commercial aspects of the area, such as Brick Lane, where people come from all over London to enjoy what they imagine to be "Indian" foods.



But this also means there is tension over how the neighbourhood should be presented in terms of community and space for "outsiders" from the Muslim community and the community based on location. Eade (1989) also shows how within the borough there has been considerable racism and tension caused by so-called competition for resources. He says:

White working class resentment of 'immigrants', has largely focused on Bangladeshis whom they see as competing for scarce council housing and the British National Party gained a brief electoral success council housing in 1993.

Eade shows how the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets has been involved for many years in challenges over "ownership" of local identity, and how party politics have competed for representation of the Bengali community. This is even more apparent in recent political events in the borough. The area can be seen as a central place for debates over Muslim representation in British politics, and the borough sometimes seems to be a battleground for certain political parties who use this dynamic of different identity groups to seize power. One young man in Tower

Hamlets told me that he sees this, and thinks it comes from a wish among especially young Muslims to “reduce their invisibility in the political arena”.

Lewis (1994) study of the relationship between religious identity and political activity shows us that Muslims have been present in Britain for a long time, and have contributed much too political process. Locally, the most prominent case in Tower Hamlets as a case study for this is the defeat of the Labour party by George Galloway’s Respect party in the last election (2005) in a very conservational and well publicised campaign. Britain’s choice to side with US in attacking Iraq and not pulling out its troops was an important *election slogan* for George Galloway’s campaign, where his platform was centred largely on attacking the labour policy on Iraq as well as its foreign policy particularly towards Muslim countries. He famously promised to the Muslim community and the East London Mosque to fly the Palestinian flag on the roof of the Tower Hamlets council offices if he was to be elected. He was very effective in using Muslim opposition to such Middle East issues, and the feelings of British Muslims that they were not represented in politics.



According to one woman I spoke to when I was taking photographs in Whitechapel, who is a young Muslim, trainee Barrister, Muslim identity had a lot to do with the recent power changes. Najiba says: “Tower Hamlet is much more Muslim or looks Muslim than 10 years ago, the community expanded to the extent that most the community members don’t see the need to be integrated to British way of life, as most of their needs are mostly dealt with by members of the same of community. But the real changes have come to light around the time of last election when political parties tried to win Muslim votes in the borough, especially off the recent tension between the Islamic world and the West, as well as wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I think this may contribute to the Labour defeat and Gorge Galloway’s success. He was someone who tried to show his solidarity to the Muslims globally”.

Najiba’s comments also show how transnationalism is an issue for Muslims in Tower Hamlets, who feel connected to a global Muslim group but maybe not to the local community. At the same time, these recent local events show the emergence of Muslim identity acting as political identity (see also Lewis, 1994). But this remains problematic because the Muslim community in the borough is itself diverse and divided to different categories, so we cannot assume a single community. Each generation, ethnicity and nationality have different approaches to British politics, Muslim identity and views in regard with recent tension between Islam and the West. Baumann’s work on identity in a multicultural area of west London shows the diversity in Muslim societies in Britain, and that even if political struggles over Muslim identity politics occur, Muslims themselves do not expect “any more than

Christians do, that the bond of a shared faith should render their multiplicity of cultures mutually intelligible or even compatible, let alone ‘the same’” (Baumann, 1996:125).

One battleground within the community in Tower Hamlets for example has been with respect to different generations and their experience of Islam. Younger generations may feel it is important to focus on activism and discrimination, while more traditional factions in the community see this as distracting from the true nature of Islam. The opening of the east London mosque was a central site for many activities in the community with respect to these struggles. The mosque has challenged dominant narratives of the first Bengali settler activists, who focussed on the politics of Muslim identity. These secularists wanted to promote Bengali New Year as political statement about Bengali culture and language. It has come to be a festival comparable to Notting Hill Carnival, something the mosque has disagreed with strongly. They viewed such events as not “proper” and most importantly non Islamic, as they would lead to mixing of male and female, and that the event promoted drinking. At the same time, it is frequent to see trendy images of Muslim identity promoted among young residents of Tower hamlets, and even to see this commodified in the form of



dress or music. Eade discussed this in his recent graduate seminar at the University of Kent. He talked about the “purificatory drives” within migrant communities, and that the boundaries of acceptable or “real” Muslim (or Bangladeshi) identity. In some ways there is a tendency towards fundamentalism, but at the same time it shows us that there is a danger in creating a unified image of Muslim communities for political ends, since the internal diversity is far greater than the portrayals of either Galloway or the conservative representatives of the East London Mosque would indicate. For young Muslims, the aim may be political participation and increased inclusion, but for conservative or older community members there may be a desire to preserve unity and identity.

The same can be said in terms of these recent political events. One young man I spoke to, a shopkeeper in a Muslim bookshop in Whitechapel, thought it was entertaining and good for the community that their MP was now appearing on national TV in Big Brother. But for proponents of a more conservative view, even those who supported Galloway in the election, there has been a change of heart about their representative in British Parliament. Many view him as an opportunist who used the Muslim community in order to seize power. They have seen pictures of him with Saddam Hussein, but most shamefully his recent television appearance on the reality show. Traditionalist saw their MP as disrespecting the Muslim community by doing such things.

The borough of Tower Hamlets has been transformed in many ways to an Islamic space, largely through the rather rapid chain migration of Bangladeshis since the 1970's to the heart of typical British east London's Brick Lane. This has had a big impact on the way the borough is viewed generally, but also on the way that local political events take place and on wider political debates such as British approval for the war in Iraq, Middle East peace and transnational migration with respect to Muslim communities and their integration into British society and especially politics. Tower Hamlets can be seen as one area in which new struggles over Muslim identity and inclusion in politics are taking place in very visible ways. The streets have taken on an Islamic character, with sights such as the minarets of the East London mosque clearly visible, many people in traditional Muslim dress and even the markers of commodified identity, as mentioned above with the t-shirts or restaurants which are a big draw for non-residents to visit the area.

This paper has tried to show how the marginalisation of Muslims in British politics has led to the struggle over their vote, and how Tower Hamlets, with Galloway as MP, has been a special case for this. Many young Muslims backed his campaign on the grounds of his attitudes towards

foreign policy issues affecting Muslims globally. Transnational migration and lack of integration in the borough have affected local Muslim identity as well. At the same time, within the Muslim community there are many interpretations about how this Islamic identity should be represented, and this extends to the visual as well as other areas of life. Using photographs and some brief interviews with residents, this paper has examined the Muslim character of Tower Hamlets and the ways this has become a part of wider politics.



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