

# Sport, Muslim identities and cultures in the UK: Case studies of Leicester and Birmingham. A British Academy funded project

## Contact details

Name author(s): Mahfoud Amara & Henry Ian  
 Institution(s) or organisation(s): Loughborough University  
 City and country: Loughborough, UK  
 Email address for correspondence: M.Amara@lboro.ac.uk

## Aim of paper and research questions

The research aims to examine how Muslims in two specific local contexts in the UK (Leicester in the East Midlands; Birmingham in the West Midlands) make sense of the relationship between their religious (Islamic) identities and sporting interests. Leicester in the East Midlands and Birmingham in the West Midlands have been selected because they represent respectively one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Britain and a domicile of one third of the Muslim population in Britain, according to (Office of National Statistic) 2002 census figures. The research questions are as follow:

1. How the meanings and the practices of sport are negotiated (based on the fundamentals of Islamic belief) by Islamic associations/mosques centres, in a western milieu in general, and in Leicester and Birmingham in particular?
2. What are the obstacles and the challenges for participation in sport and how access to funds and facilities are being negotiated by Islamic associations (to accommodate religious positions with mainstream sport practice in western societies)?
3. What role sport should /and can play in cross and intercultural dialogues within Muslim communities and between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK.

## Literature review

The atmosphere of fear which followed 9/11 and 7/7 bombings in New York and London, brought to the surface the debate around Multicultural policy in Britain. Trevor Phillips, Chairman for the Commission on Racial Equality, in April 2004 argued that Britain's policy of multiculturalism had gone too far, and that there was a need to ensure that a core of British values remained intact. More recently the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, publicly opposed the wearing of the veil by Muslim constituents in particular contexts (Sturcke, 2006). Thus, there is evidence, in some areas of government and the quasi-government sector, of a shift to 'interculturalism' to promote common interests and a shared sense of belonging as an alternative to 'Multiculturalism which is accused today of encouraging 'separateness' (Kristianasen, 2006). That said, one can still argue however that scepticism around multiculturalism is not shared by everybody. The rhetoric of multiculturalism was very present in the bidding for the 2012 Olympic Games, to legitimate the British readiness to host the Olympic Games (proclaimed to be the space par excellence for the expression/ celebration of 'cultural diversity' and 'cultural exchange'), and in the same token to de-legitimise 'other' rival nations bidding for the Games and their policies toward ethnic minorities (Carrington & McDonald, 2008). In relation to the fields of sport policy analysis and sport management, the study engages with the debate on sport and the politics of identity from the perspective of Muslim communities on national and

regional policies which apply sport as a mean of social inclusion, community cohesion and cross cultural dialogue (Walseth, 2006).

### Research design and data analysis

In addition to secondary sources (such as web pages, annual reports and previous studies on Muslim communities in Leicester and Birmingham) exploratory semi structured interviews were conducted with selected Muslim organisations (6 in total) which are using sport as part of their activities to target Muslim communities in Leicester and Birmingham.

Critical Discourse Analysis was employed as the principal method of analysis. It focuses on unmasking ideologically permeated and often obscured structures of power, political control and dominance, as well as discriminatory inclusion and exclusion (group, gender, class) in language use (Wodak and Meyer 2001). The aim of CDA for this study was to:

- grasp the pluralistic (hybrid) discourses around modernity and/in Islam as well as sport in modernity, and sport and/in Islam;
- determine how Muslims are constructing their religious identities – what Akbar (2007) refers to as a whole range of action and strategies – as a result of their current situation (as minorities in a western secular context);
- identify the action and strategies they are adopting in relation to modern sport in a western milieu. In particular we ask whether the strategy is one of “accepting”, “preserving” or “synthesising”?

### Discussion and conclusion

The interviewees exhibit with regards to the nature and function of sport, aspects of:

*Acceptance:* of sport as a non political domain, universal culture or language, and as an element of the rich Islamic tradition and history.

*Preserving:* *Shari'a* as Interpretative Dominant Discourse in interpreting the meaning and the space (environment) where sport practice should take place. The practice/ and access to sport in the vicinity of the mosque becomes a means of strengthening the relationship of the youth with their religion and thus preserving them from the negative elements of British society (e.g. drugs, crimes) as well as from extremism. Moreover, there is an avoidance of the equal opportunities debate which is seen as not in favour of preserving the purity of Islam.

*Synthesising:* integration of British values of active citizenship, inter-faith dialogue community cohesion and marketing strategies in attracting funds; as well as women's rights, or at least their right to accommodate their sport practice to their faith.

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