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Creating Diversities

Folklore, Religion and the Politics of Heritage

Edited by Anna-Leena Siikala, Barbro Klein & Stein R. Mathisen

Studia Fennica
Folkloristica

The effects of globalization and the momentous changes to the political map of Europe have led to a world in which multiculturalism and ethnic differences have become issues of increasing importance. In Nordic countries, relationships between new immigrants, local ethnic groups and majorities are created in ongoing and sometimes heated discussions. In transforming multicultural societies, folklore has taken on new manifestations and meanings. How can folklore studies illuminate the present cultural, political and historical changes?

Creating Diversities. Folklore, Religion and the Politics of Heritage seeks answers to this question. It emphasizes two important factors in the cultural and political exchanges among historical minorities, recent immigrants, and the majority groups dictating the conditions of these exchanges. The first factor is religion, which is a powerful tool in the construction of ethnic selves and in the establishment of boundaries between groups. The second factor is the role of national and regional folklore archives and ethnographic and cultural historical museums which create ideas and images of minorities. These representations, created in different political climates, affect the general understanding of the people depicted.

Fifteen well-known folklorists and ethnographers from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia and the United States offer insights and background material on these problems. In addition to immigrants and ethnic minorities in the Nordic countries, especially the Sámi, examples are sought from among the Finno-Ugrian minorities in Russia and the Nordic population in North America.

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PIA KARLSSON MINGANTI

Mosques in Sweden

On Identity and Spatial Belonging

"Culture still takes place"[1], claims the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren, in opposition to commonly voiced arguments that the post-modern identity is characterised by homelessness and placelessness. In a critical examination using a historical perspective, he shows how the other side of the coin of perceived fragmentation and disintegration is a process of institutionalisation and reanchorage (Löfgren 1997). However, at the same time as immigrants make symbolic and emotional bonding to a new physical space, this space is already loaded with meanings, such as perceptions of national belonging. In her research, Barbro Klein (1997, 2000a, 2000b) has shown how the conception of cultural heritage as specific to nations or cultures is deeply rooted. This notion often seems connected to the idea that cultural heritage ought not to transgress national borders, thus risking its perceived authenticity. Klein further points at how seemingly trivial objects may be turned into strong symbols of identity and become part of a politics of culture and diversity.

What implications do these observations have for Muslim immigrants in contemporary Sweden? In the middle of the 1990s I was invited to carry out a study of mosque-building projects in Sweden.[2] The aim was to investigate how local politicians and authorities dealt with the specific cases as well as to analyse reactions from the general public in communities where Muslims had submitted applications to build mosques. In this article I intend to present some reflections on mosques as symbols of identity and spatial belonging, not only for Muslims themselves but also for non-Muslims in their surrounding society.[3] By way of introduction I will give a brief background to mosques and Muslim consolidation in Sweden. Then I will structure my article according to two themes: (1) objections against mosques from some parts of the non-Muslim majority of Sweden, and (2) strategies developed by Muslims interested in managing this opposition.

Mosques and Muslim Consolidation in Sweden

Islam is a living faith in contemporary Sweden. The Muslim presence is primarily the result of post-war labour and refugee immigration. The major

part of the labour migrants recruited during the 1960s and 1970s were men who managed to practise their religion in relatively unpretentious conditions. They usually nourished a plan to return to their home countries and put their religiosity on ice, or else confined themselves to praying in simple spaces at work or in the apartment of a colleague. Refugees arriving in Sweden in recent decades, likewise, often dream of going back, but for the majority it is evident that they have come to stay and that their children will grow up in a new homeland. The significance of religion is thus renewed, and an important step in Muslim consolidation is to establish mosques. They are required as institutions, public arenas, and religious spaces, and wherever Muslims have the organisational and financial opportunities, plans to build mosques have been presented. Most mosques, however, are still located in premises such as basements and rented apartments.

The heterogeneous Muslim community in Sweden embraces followers from all over the world and from different social strata.[4] In their comprehensive study of the situation of Muslims in Europe, W. A. R. Shadid and P. S. van Koningsveld (1995: 23–24) claim that there is a correlation between the number of active Muslims in a town and the extent to which they share mosques on ethnic or confessional lines. In countries with a large Muslim population a mosque is in most cases mono-ethnic or mono-denominational. Only in small towns with few Muslim inhabitants are mosques founded in co-operation between different groups. In Sweden the relatively few Swedish Muslims are liable to co-operate even in larger cities (Alwall 1998: 236). Often a mosque is dominated by a certain group constellation but attracts members across conceived borders and keeps its doors open to everyone. Still, some Muslims choose to distance themselves from the existing congregations and practice their religion more or less anonymously.

To date, five purpose-built mosques have been erected in Sweden. The first one was consecrated in 1975 in Gothenburg by the Ahmaddiya group, which is not recognised by the Muslim majority. In the early 1980s a mosque was built in Malmö by an ethnically mixed congregation. During the same period a mosque was established in Trollhättan by a small and united group of Ugandan Asian Shiah Muslims. For the majority of the ethnically mixed Sunni congregations under the umbrella organisation *Sveriges Muslimska Råd, SMR* (The Swedish Muslim Council), it took a long time to obtain permits for their projects. In 1996 they consecrated a mosque in Uppsala, and finally, in June 2000, one in the centre of Stockholm. Apart from internal organisational and financial hindrances the Muslims have been confronted by perplexed local politicians and vociferous opposition from parts of the general public.

Opposition to Mosques

The possibility for Muslims to create a functional infrastructure and strengthen their Muslim identity through, for instance, a distinct mosque is not only dependent on internal matters such as organisational and financial opportuni-

ties. It is also a question of winning approval from the general public[5] and the authorities. Among the pre-existing structures that Muslims immigrating to Sweden meet are old town plans, perceptions of cultural heritage, and ideas about how new buildings are to be shaped in accordance with such plans and perceptions. The discussions of mosque plans have often taken the shape of a contestation of public space. A notion of domiciliary rights in a local environment challenged by the Muslim presence is reflected in letters to the press and local politicians and authorities:

> We who are born here and have lived here all our lives do unconditionally want to try and preserve what is genuine and original about our Söder. This is our home district that we love and want to protect.
>
> Muslims from all over Stockholm and its surroundings will gather here to celebrate their feasts and we are going to be overwhelmed by cars.
>
> The Fittja creek is an oasis with its water and green open spaces with all different kinds of seabirds where boats and different spare-time activities prosper and where the neighbours are able to relax. [...] The general public feel pushed aside and we in the boat club fear for our future existence.[6]

We live our everyday lives in a physical space, which we perceive with all our senses. But we are also attached to these spaces as cultural beings, in a process where trivial experiences, things and phenomena are elaborated into explicit symbols of our very existence. This is elucidated when life as "business as usual" is interrupted by a perceived threat. Then it may be relevant to emphasise that a hill is not "just" a hill. As a young schoolgirl put it:

> To us Ramberget (the Ramhill) is not a common hill. There we would play and walk to school. And our parents and grandparents did, too.

Time is a crucial component in the construction of identity, as linked to a prescriptive right to a certain territory. The mosque plans often triggered an elaboration on local history and folklore, sometimes to an extent that would normally not be associated with the place in question. A local politician emphasised that the site chosen for a mosque in central Stockholm:

> [...] has a history which goes back to the 12th century. Torkel Knutsson was decapitated one day in February 1306 at the place of execution which then existed here.

In Gothenburg a mosque was planned next to the Ramberget hill mentioned above. It has a steep cliff, known as the "Precipice". This was stressed by the president of a local association:

> In today's world we should not challenge the hidden forces of the soul of the Swedish people. [...] Here history goes straight back to the 8000 year-old settlements, founded next to the buildings of Biskopsgården. Here the red colours of the rock-paintings of many thousand years still shine in Tumledalen. We are not even allowed to set our feet upon Mecca

> and Medina, the holy cities of the Muslims. We don't have that severe restrictions. But certain things we want to keep to ourselves. Among them the Precipice of Ramberget.

In another letter the Precipice was designated as a "national monument", which pointed not only to a local identification, but also to a national one. The national territory makes the foundation for an imagined shared Swedish culture and history. On advice from the county curator of antiquities, the local housing committee in Stockholm rejected a proposal to convert an old observatory into a mosque since it would appear "foreign to the species". So, what makes a mosque building appear "foreign to the species"? Already when the first mosque was planned in the 1970s the architect gave directives to be found in all plans to come: the mosque ought not to be garish but should follow Swedish building traditions regarding material and design. These "traditions" are often associated with a reserved aesthetics of the middle and upper classes that tends to dominate the architecture, and "public culture" in general, in the major cities of Europe (Klein 1997: 24).

The minaret, the tower from which the prayer-calls are supposed to be given, seems to have an especially strong symbolic power. As a typical example I will present here some considerations about the plan for a mosque in Lund in 1998 (Detaljplan 1995). One of the neighbours consulted as part of the process claimed that "it is not reasonable to have an observation tower from which one can have full view of our gardens". Another one asked rhetorically whether "considering Sweden's defence interests now and in the future, is it on the whole lawful to place a huge mosque structure with a 26-metre-high minaret in one of the highest and most conspicuous places in Lund and the south-west of Skåne?". The county curator of antiquities objected that, "It could be considered doubtful that a traveller on the E22 passing the medieval cathedral city of Lund should pass a mosque but only with difficulty distinguish the cathedral towers." The county administrative board stated that: "The plan area has a visually exposed position. The height of the minaret will strongly affect the landscape and be visible from a long distance. From a cultural point of view it is suggested that the height of the minaret should be limited to half the one stated." Obviously the minaret constitutes an important visual symbol. All but one of the purpose-built mosques erected in Sweden are equipped with a minaret. However, they have become literally symbolic for the Muslims too, since external prayer-calls are strictly forbidden by the Swedish authorities. Apparently, in this case the symbolic force of the sound exceeds that of vision.[7]

One possible way to erect a "strange" building is to exclude it from the public sphere. There has been a common proposal from both local politicians and future neighbours to locate a planned mosque on industrial estates or in remote forest areas. In many towns the case of building mosques was delayed. The issue was passed to and from the local building committees and concerned authorities, above all by questioning the projected location. In Stockholm, Muslims were informed that the location suggested by the city planners, a site at Jarlaplan in the more fashionable and central quarters

of the capital, was no longer considered suitable because "no Muslims live there". While in the suburb of Tensta the Muslims were denied permission to build a mosque since it would "intensify the impression of a suburb dominated by immigrants".

The Islamic place of worship, in all its visibility, is caught in a contest for space. When perceiving an internal threat from "strange foreigners", to paraphrase Kristeva (1989: 274–277), the national identity may undertake a revival as well as some ethnicisation. Like Pertti J. Anttonen (2000b: 253), I would argue that "attitudes and fears concerning immigrants and refugees, and foreigners in general, have to do with the way in which 'the national' is discursively constructed in a particular nation-state context." The Swedish national project follows the common pattern of the notion of one people, one land, one history, one culture – and one religion. The Christian heritage is valued, but so is the secular or even atheistic heritage – both now thought of as threatened by believers in Islam. It is not only a Swedish national identity that is revived. In a dual ethnicisation process "the other" is pushed into the homogeneous category of "the Muslim" (Bloul 1996: 247). In the mosque-building processes the anxiety about Islam as a religion and Muslims as human beings is evident, but stereotyped:

> Muslims treat their women almost as bad as their animals.
>
> The Koran is dangerous because it encourages acts of violence.
>
> The site is located just opposite a primary school. We all know that some buildings are easier targets for terrorist attacks than others. [...] There is a great risk for children to be hurt in possible future bomb attacks against the mosque.
>
> These people, who live entirely on us and do not want to work, but most of the time are on the sick-list – turn them out of Sweden. They are nothing but a burden to us.[8]

The category "Muslim" carries on a long tradition of negative stereotyping, well examined by Edward Said (1978). The Swedish ethnologist Magnus Berg (1998) has further illustrated how this "Orientalist" discourse still works in contemporary popular culture. In light of some high-ranking international academics' and politicians' judgement of Islam as the greatest threat to the Western world after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Muslim might today be said to constitute the ultimate stranger (Cf. Huntington 1993).

The Mosque from a Muslim Perspective

Given these consequences of a politics of difference, how have Muslims engaged in building mosques in Sweden resisted the opposition to their plans? Below I will outline some tendencies.

A Symbol of Integration

In contrast to the common argument among the opponents that the mosque would encourage segregation, the Muslims have eagerly held up the mosque as a symbol of integration. First, a visible mosque would be a sign of acceptance by the Swedish citizens and society of the Muslim presence. Secondly, it would constitute an arena for Muslim integration in pluralistic terms; that is, integration into the society without giving up one's religion and cultural identity. The former president of SMR, Mahmood Aldebe, once presented the mosque not only as a place of worship but also as a social welfare office, an education centre, a cultural forum and an information department. As a token of this direction towards what the former Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson once labelled as the Swedish "People's Home", he suggested that the mosque should be regarded as a community centre, a *Folkets Hus* (People's House) (Aldebe 1988: 37). This idea involves an open attitude towards Swedish visitors. For instance, during the first year of the Uppsala mosque the congregation gave tours to an average of four groups a day coming from different workplaces, schools, parties, associations, etc. On their homepage the Islamic Centre in Malmö claim an average of 85,000 non-Muslim visitors a year.[9] The mosque as a meeting place was also strongly emphasised during the consecration of the mosque in central Stockholm and in the pamphlet published for this event (Islam i korthet 2000).

The notion of *Folkets Hus* also involves a tradition of numerous functions of the mosque in Muslim societies in general. This is reflected in an Arabic word for mosque, *jamaa*, which means "gathering". The term is commonly used for the largest mosque in a community, where the united Friday prayer and sermon are performed. This underscores the function of the mosque as a social institution, where people (especially men) meet and ideologies, norms and values are formed and maintained. For Swedish Muslims, lacking institutions permeated with Islam in a non-Muslim country, the importance of the social functions of the mosque is even greater.

The word mosque derives from the Arabic word *masjid,* meaning "place for prostration". According to the tradition, the Prophet Mohammed has claimed the Earth to be *masjid*, that is, any place would be ritually clean for saying prayers. However, the people praying must turn their faces to Mecca. Thus, all praying Muslims around the globe are connected like spokes around Mecca as a hub and further, through a vertical axis, connected with God. The image of Muslims connected across space and national borders is a powerful symbol of the Muslim *umma*, the global Muslim community. This vision of identity and spatial belonging may have an even greater importance for Muslims in non-Muslim countries. However, as Bryan S. Turner states, the idealistic construction of the *umma* has never been completely institutionalised (1994: 84–85). This is above all a matter of authority and of the heterogeneity of Muslims, something which again points to the importance of the social and political dimensions when studying Islam in practice, such as with mosque-building projects.

A Visual Manifestation of Islamic Presence

Mahmood Aldebe, mentioned above as a former president of SMR, claimed in his description of mosques that, "A mosque building is an absolute necessity to enable a Muslim group to function. As long as no such building exists, the Muslims feel rootless and very unsatisfied" (Aldebe 1988: 37). This "rootlessness" brings us back to the idea of the mosque not only as an institution, but also as a key symbol of Muslim life. It allows Muslims to find anchorage in the new context, that is, by social integration and manifested presence in the physical space. Here the mosque, alongside the female Muslim dress code, is perhaps the most powerful visual symbol. It is the same power that tends to threaten a perceived Swedish identity and cultural heritage. Aware of how the mosque is provocative as something strange, Muslims have developed at least two strategies in the encounter between their mosque-building plans and the surrounding society. A young Muslim expressed these strategies in a rather precise way in an e-mail group:[10]

> 1) a confrontational and maximising strategy – in time people get used to it, better to shock from the beginning than to crawl on your knees, most of the Muslims here are immigrants who would feel at home with Turkish/Arabic mosques.
>
> 2) an obliging and cautious strategy – it is better not to show that Islam is a religion from outer space, but indeed could become a natural part of the religious landscape of Sweden. The situation is so tense in this country that it is of the utmost importance to be careful. Maybe a question of survival in the long run, and why get impulses from abroad when you can dig where you stand?[11]

The latter position is often advocated by young Muslims, who look upon Islam as a Swedish religion and who search for inspiration in the Swedish cultural heritage for colours, material and form. Also the Moorish heritage is suggested to be an old part of Swedish architecture that ought to be brought out. The young man himself, probably both jokingly and seriously at the same time, suggested "Falun red mosques with white corners"[12] in line with "a calm and balanced Islam, anchored in, and in respect of, the Swedish cultural heritage".[13] The cautious position may also, roughly generalised, be represented by the Turkish-dominated national organisation, *Islamiska Kulturcenter Unionen i Sverige*, IKUS (The Islamic Culturecentre Union in Sweden). Like other Muslim congregations, they mainly inhabit premises such as basements and rented apartments. In the few cases where mosque buildings have been discussed, they have shown no interest in giving the building an "Islamic" exterior, for instance by erecting a minaret. They have rather focused on functional topics, something that is common for local mosques in the Muslim world. In the city of Västerås they have taken over a building previously used as a cinema and Pentecostal Church. In Alby, a suburb south of Stockholm, there were well-advanced plans to build an *Allaktivitetshus*, a community centre. The building was supposed to accommodate a prayer hall, but also to facilitate other kinds of activities,

such as billiards for young people in the presence of adult role models. The external religious attributes were to be deliberately toned down so as not to alienate these young people.

The first strategy is represented in all five "proper" mosques now existing, and in the prospects presented by the umbrella organisation, the Swedish Muslim Council. So what does an "Islamic" exterior mean? This question points to the problem of heritage as a selective process, highlighted by the Nordic project and network, "Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity" (Anttonen 2000a). The design of a mosque is not prescribed in the Koran, but the first one built during the life of the Prophet Mohammed serves as a model. According to the tradition this mosque was very simple and had neither dome nor minaret. Apart from one basic common element, the orientation to Mecca, during the centuries mosques around the world have taken the shape of local architectural traditions.[14] What is happening today, as a result of migration and increased communication technology, is that Islam is revealed to be a pluralistic phenomenon, despite a common religious terminology and local beliefs in a one-and-only "authentic" religion. Muslims are forced to self-reflexivity and Islam is being objectified (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). As a result there is a lively discussion among Muslims, both locally and in what have been described by Arjun Appadurai (1996) as diasporic public spheres, about how a mosque is supposed to be shaped. An example from Sweden is the following question put by a Muslim convert and architect to the members in the e-mail group mentioned above:

> What do you think a mosque should look like? What are the important components a mosque cannot be without? What do we take for granted as culture and tradition from different parts of the world, and what is the essence of the mosque? Is the mosque an advertising sign or should we find a kind of original function and meaning of the soul of the house of prayers?[15]

A general outcome of this process is that mosques in today's world tend to share two attributes, the dome and the minaret, after a design associated with the Middle East (Holod and Khan 1997: 12).

Concluding Remarks

Today building permits have been issued in several towns in Sweden and Islam is made public and visible after decades of it being "underground". For organisational, demographic and financial reasons Muslims will also find their rented apartments and basements satisfactory in the future, even though prayer halls might have to be turned inside to face Mecca. When purpose-built mosques are constructed, one must accept that the minaret is only symbolic and that prayer calls are for the time-being not allowed outdoors. Sometimes there are opportunities to take over an already existing building, such as the Pentecostal Church in Västerås or an old power-station as in Stockholm. The latter, the so-called Katarina station, was designed by the renowned Ferdi-

nand Boberg at the beginning of the twentieth century. Owing to a journey to North Africa, the "Orient" was a source of inspiration for his design. It also happens that the building has always been pointing to Mecca, right from its inception, so the Muslims of Stockholm in the 1990s accepted it as an excellent object for rebuilding. After decades of being part of Stockholmers' everyday life without giving offence, the building now actually constitutes a Muslim space, complete with a dome and a minaret.

In this article I have looked at mosque buildings as symbols of an Islamic presence, signalling to both Muslims and non-Muslims. From the horizon of certain Swedes, the mosques are viewed as threatening Swedish national, Western cultural and Christian identity as well as causing segregation in contrast to the required assimilation, if allowing at all for immigration. The Muslims engaged in the projects, on the other hand, claim the mosque to be just another element in a pluralistic society, a tool for integration, while maintaining distinctiveness. All parties engaged in the building processes have adopted the discourse on folk heritage. It makes legitimate arguments for opponents to mosques in contrast to a simple disapproval of Muslims. Muslims need the same kind of legitimacy when it turns out not to be enough to emphasise their citizenship or to claim freedom of religion to get a building permit. With a recommendation to "dig where you stand" the young cyber-Muslim further illustrates a scholarly heritage (by using the phrase coined by the Swedish author Sven Lindqvist in 1978). Here we ought to consider Regina Bendix's argumentation that heritage is drawn upon by majorities, minorities as well as academics, and that "[w]hat distinguishes heritage is its capacity to hide the complexities of history and politics" (Benedix 2000: 38).

In light of the establishment of Islam in Sweden, reflected in the development of mosques, a professor of Islamology, Jan Hjärpe, once suggested that the open-air museum Skansen, or any other Swedish museum, should document the interior appointments of basement and apartment mosques as a part of Swedish cultural history (Hjärpe 1994: 15). This is in line with the efforts made by Barbro Klein (1997, 2000a, b) in her work calling on folklorists to problematize the idea of a homogeneous national heritage. Even if Hjärpe's idea is far from being realized, I would suggest that Muslims in contemporary Sweden have, in certain respects, reached a relatively propitious position. With proper mosques realized or soon to be realized in several towns, suburbs and in the centre of the capital, with a recently published new translation of the Koran into Swedish, and with a vivid youth movement, Swedish Muslims will probably enter a new phase of consolidation. In this phase they will play an increasingly larger part in official social life, but this will also mean that they are scrutinised to a higher degree than before. We might have discussions on concrete issues beyond the mosque as a symbol. These would probably be connected with fundamental ideas, in themselves crucial components in different identity formations, such as national or religious ones. How, for instance, will an Islamic perspective on gender and gender roles be presented? What are the possibilities and hindrances when it comes to women practising Islam in Sweden? And what do the mosques

imply in this matter? The plans for the mosques in question include separate spaces for women, and separate entrances. In this way their presence in the mosque is guaranteed, which has not been the case always and anywhere. At the same time, the distinction between women and men is cemented (Holod and Khan 1997: 21). Surely, such arguments delineate a field for discussion, and even controversy, worth monitoring and open to further research.[16]

NOTES

1. All the quotations from Swedish texts in this article have been freely translated into English by the author.
2. The work resulted in several publications, e.g., Karlsson 1997, 1999, 2000b; Karlsson and Svanberg 1995, 1997.
3. For further reading on the making of Muslim space in diaspora, see Metcalf 1996.
4. Swedish Muslims emphasise their Muslim identity for different reasons and in different situations. The community also contains non-believers who still identify themselves as Muslims on cultural or ethnic grounds. Correspondingly, the community embraces people who primarily present themselves according to ethnic or ideological lines and only secondly or even thirdly according to their religious affirmation. For further reading on self-presentations by Muslims in Sweden, see Karlsson 2000a.
5. The opposition to mosques consisted mainly of letters from neighbours of the planned mosque, but also from other concerned citizens. It was directed towards local politicians, authorities and the press. Sometimes the opposition took a more organised form such as housing co-operatives, different congregations or other associations, or around a self-appointed leader. The letters are now filed away in the archives of local councils and city-planners' offices. For further information, see Karlsson and Svanberg 1995.
6. The first two quotations are taken from letters from prospective neighbours to the planned mosque at Södermalm (Söder), a district in central Stockholm. The third quotation is from a letter connected to the plans in Fittja, a suburb south of Stockholm.
7. Due to colonial relations with Muslim countries, some official mosques have been built previously in some capitals of Western Europe without drawing any negative attention. Otherwise mosque building projects in Western Europe follow the same tendencies as I present here in the Swedish context. In some cities prayer-calls are allowed on certain occasions, for instance as an introduction to the holy month of Ramadan or to the Friday prayer. The latter is the case in Oslo after a decision made in 2000 (see Karlsson and Svanberg 1995, 1997; cf. Eade 1996, 1997).
8. The first, second and fourth quotation are taken from letters written in opposition to the mosque in Gothenburg, and the third towards the one in Jordbro, a suburb south of Stockholm.
9. Homepage of the Islamic Centre in Malmö: http://www.algonet.se/~icmalmo/.
10. SFCM – "Sveriges Förenade CyberMuslimer": http://hem.passagen.se/sfcm/.
11. "Re: Moskéer i Sverige", SFCM's mail-list, November 1999.
12. This red and white painting represents a stereotyped but much beloved image of "the traditional Swedish house".
13. "Blågul islam?", SFCM's mail-list, April 1998.
14. In the mosque the orientation towards Mecca, *qibla*, is indicated by a niche, *mihrab*. The niche and the wall behind are often exquisitely decorated, but figurative representations would touch upon polytheism and are in principle forbidden. Geometrical ornaments and calligraphy, on the contrary, have been allowed and accomplished. Another common element in the major mosques of towns is the pulpit,

minbar, from which the sermon is held in connection with Friday prayers. Praying publicly in the mosque is considered meritorious for males aged 12 or more and given by God as the occasion of common Muslim worship. It is thus regarded as a manifestation of unity, collective piety, common order and responsibility. If women visit the mosque they are separated from the men by a drapery, railing or a wall, or by using a separate part of the building, i.e., a gallery. Apart from this separation based on gender, Muslims ideally pray shoulder to shoulder without distinction of rank or skin colour.

15. "Moskéer i Sverige", SFCM's mail-list, November 1999.
16. This is the point of departure for the thesis I am currently working on, which focuses on young "practising" Muslim women engaged in Muslim congregations and youth movements.

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