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Emerging "Indigenous" Islam in Colombia: Conversions, Identity, and Community Challenges

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, conversions to Islam in Colombia have increased significantly, with Latin American "indigenous" Muslims (converts or direct descendants of converts) now forming the majority in most mosques, congregations and Islamic centers. These conversions arise from various motivations, including spiritual exploration, intellectual curiosity, and relational or emotional factors, often intertwined. A distinction can be drawn between "collective conversions," where dozens of individuals in a given area embrace Islam together, and "individual conversions," which are more dispersed and numerous. This article goes beyond examining the motivations and conditions of these conversions to explore the emergence of an "indigenous Islam" in Colombia and the dynamics surrounding the development and assertion of local Muslim communities, primarily composed of converts. Key challenges for these communities include negotiating knowledge and legitimacy within mixed groups of migrants and "indigenous" Muslims, constructing a plural identity that blends local (Latin American) social and cultural elements with Islamic references, including a sense of belonging to the universal Ummah, and contextualizing religious norms and discourses in light of the local social realities. Furthermore, this study delves into the critical issue of sustaining these small, often fragile communities over time. Drawing on fieldwork and qualitative analysis, this paper aims to provide insights into how Islam is being understood, lived, and rooted in a predominantly Catholic and secular Colombian society, contributing to broader discussions on religion, identity, and social change in Latin America.

Keywords: Islam; conversions; Muslims; Colombia; Latin America; identity; indigenous Islam; Ummah; Muslim converts; Salafism; Sufism

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Context

Over the past few decades, conversions to Islam in Colombia have increased significantly, to the extent that Latin American "indigenous" Muslims—understood here as individuals who have converted to Islam or who were born to convert parents—now constitute the majority of many Islamic congregations across the country, with the exception of a few areas characterized by a strong Lebanese diasporic presence. These conversions stem from a range of motivations, including spiritual exploration, intellectual inquiry, and relational or emotional factors, which are often closely intertwined. A distinction may be drawn between

"collective conversions" in which dozens of individuals within a specific locality embrace Islam together, and more dispersed and numerically predominant "individual conversions."

Despite these developments, Islam in Latin America has long remained marginal within academic scholarship. While the past two decades have witnessed a gradual increase in research, existing studies have primarily focused on historical processes (Diouf 1998; Gomez 2005; Cook 2016; Akande 2016), cultural and political anthropology (Aidi 2014), comparative and transnational perspectives (Delval 1992; Logroño Narbona et al. 2015; Chitwood 2021; Brodard 2023a), or contemporary sociological and ethnographic analyses (Ismu Kusumo 2004, 2010; Cañas Cuevas 2006; Medina 2014; Garcia Linares 2020). Within this broader field, the Colombian case has received particularly limited attention. The Muslim population in Colombia—comprising both converts and migrants—is estimated at approximately 14,000 individuals according to the Pew Research Center's 2010 estimation (Pew Research Center 2011)[1]. Despite the community's growing visibility in recent decades, scholarly research on Islam in Colombia remains scarce. Two relatively recent studies nevertheless constitute important reference points. García Flórez (2007) examines the historical emergence, consolidation, and identity formation of the Muslim minority in Colombia from the nineteenth century onward, with particular attention to migration, state policies, and national identity, and also introduces the case of Maicao (García Flórez 2007, pp. 70–75). Castellanos (2010), for his part, offers a sociological and religious overview of Islam in Colombia, with a particular focus on Bogotá, while situating the Colombian case within broader Latin American dynamics. Together, these works provide valuable descriptive and historical insights but leave considerable room for further ethnographic and analytical exploration of contemporary Islamic practices and communities in Colombia.

Beyond these two pioneering studies, existing academic accounts of Muslim communities in Colombia are largely fragmented. Most focus either on specific urban settings or regions (Murillo Potes 2012; Tello Neira 2013), or on specific congregations or areas of investigation (Castellanos 2014b, 2016; Sarrazin and Tamayo 2017; Cadena García 2018; Solano Urrutia 2020; Brodard 2023b). Notably, several studies examine the Shiite Afro-Colombian Muslim community of Buenaventura (Castellanos 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Valencia Potes 2014; Torres Calzada 2023), a pioneering and locally rooted group whose "autochthonous" character has also attracted significant media attention (The Guardian 2017). At the other geographical extreme of the country, Maicao hosts the largest Muslim community in Colombia, whose overwhelming majority belongs to the Lebanese diaspora (García Flórez 2007). Other scholarly contributions focus primarily on specific Muslim congregations in various locations, without offering a broader reflection on the national configuration of Islam in Colombia. Several research studies focus on recent conversions to Islam in Bogotá or other Colombian cities (Murillo Potes 2012; Rincón 2013; Tello Neira 2013; Ávila Muñoz 2015; Lozano Bohórquez 2016; Domínguez Portugal 2019b). Interestingly, most of this academic literature addressing Islam in Colombia has been produced in the form of undergraduate and master's theses. Overall, the main limitation of existing scholarship lies in the lack of connectivity between these diverse case studies, which often address highly distinct Muslim congregations in isolation. As a result, integrative analyses capable of accounting for the development, diversification, and localization of Islam across Colombia as a whole remain largely absent.

To address this gap, this article draws on a series of empirical studies conducted between 2020 and 2024 in various regions of Colombia, examining the contemporary development of Islamic congregations with a particular focus on "indigenous" Muslims rather than Muslim migrants. It argues that the current Muslim presence in Colombia is largely shaped by local individuals who have converted to Islam or whose parents did so, rather

than by recent migration. Fieldwork evidence shows that, in most of the Islamic congregations visited across the country, these locally rooted Muslims constitute the majority, while diasporic Arabs and migrant Muslims often form a minority, albeit with significant variations depending on the location.

While conversions of local populations to Islam have been examined in several contexts, the phenomenon of indigenous conversion remains underexplored in scholarly literature. Nonetheless, a few relevant studies, such as those on the Tzotzil Muslims in Chiapas, Mexico (Cañas Cuevas 2006; Ismu Kusumo 2010), as well as in the geographically remote context of New Zealand (Arkilic 2020, 2025), offer some insight into how indigenous communities engage with Islam. In the Chiapas case, these studies show that most Muslim communities emerged from the conversion of indigenous Tzotzil populations following the proselytizing activities of Spanish missionaries linked to the Murabitun movement, after which, some converts established their own congregations while maintaining connections with broader transnational Islamic networks. Arkilic similarly highlights that Māori are overrepresented among converts in New Zealand and argues that Islam can function as a source of resilience against marginalization and prejudice, particularly for women within communities that frequently face oppression and stigmatization (Arkilic 2025, pp. 410–14). Taken together, these studies underscore the scarcity of research on indigenous conversion to Islam and provide a conceptual backdrop for the present article's focus on Colombia. Studies from other contexts further illustrate the ways in which converts actively negotiate Islam within their social and cultural environments. Turner (2003), for example, shows that African American converts in the United States adapt Islamic teachings to navigate racialized social structures, producing forms of Islam that are simultaneously global and locally grounded. In Europe, Diaz (2013) finds that Spanish converts—particularly in Andalusia—often draw on symbolic references to medieval Muslim Spain (*al-Andalus*), demonstrating how historical imaginaries can shape contemporary religious identification. These cases highlight that converts are not passive recipients of imported religious models but actively interpret and localize Islam. By focusing on Colombia, this article contributes new empirical insights into how predominantly convert-based Muslim communities emerge, develop local religious authority, and negotiate their identities within both Latin American and global Islamic frameworks, thereby enriching the comparative understanding of indigenous Islam in the region.

The central argument of this article is that Islam in Colombia is not merely imported through migration or external religious influences, but is actively being localized, reinterpreted, and embodied through plural, hybrid, and contextually adaptable forms of religious practice and belonging. Accordingly, the main research question examines how the growing predominance of local, autochthonous[2] Muslims—resulting from sustained patterns of conversion—contributes to the emergence of an "indigenous" Islam, understood as a locally and nationally embedded way of conceiving and living Islam within Colombian society.

Empirically, this argument is grounded in qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2024, including interviews with Colombian converts in various cities and towns, as well as participant observation in local mosques and Islamic associations. For instance, the analysis draws on narratives in which converts describe how they reinterpret Islamic norms through local cultural idioms, from religious dress to family practices and forms of community leadership.

Moving beyond an exclusive focus on the motivations and conditions of conversion, this study explores the broader dynamics through which an "indigenous Islam" is taking shape in Colombia and how predominantly convert-based Muslim communities develop, assert themselves, and endure over time. Particular attention is paid to the challenges these

communities face, including the negotiation of religious knowledge and legitimacy within mixed congregations of migrants and local Muslims, the construction of plural identities combining Latin American cultural references with Islamic frameworks and a sense of belonging to the global Ummah, and the contextualization of religious norms and discourses in relation to local social realities. Interview data further suggest that conversion motivations are primarily spiritual-intellectual, relational, or linked to cultural curiosity about the Muslim world, whereas explicitly socio-political motivations appear less frequently in individual conversion narratives.) This pattern reflects a common feature of conversion narratives, in which individuals tend to frame their trajectories primarily in spiritual and personal terms, even when broader political or social critiques may emerge later in their interpretation of Islam.

Finally, this article addresses the issue of sustainability within these often small and fragile communities. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, it offers insights into how Islam is understood, practiced, and socially rooted in a predominantly Catholic and increasingly secular Colombian context. This context reflects broader regional transformations marked by the gradual decline of Catholic institutional dominance and the diversification of religious landscapes in Latin America (Bastian 1994). The article thus contributes to broader debates on religion, identity, and social change in the region.

1.2. Indigenous Muslims in Colombia

In Latin American contemporary societies, the terms "indigenous," "autochthonous," and "native" are particularly complex and contested, as their meanings vary according to historical, political, and social contexts. Moreover, their colonial genealogy invites a critical reassessment of their analytical relevance, especially when applied to contemporary social phenomena. For these reasons, this article proposes a contextual and critical redefinition of what is meant by "indigenous" in relation to Islam in Colombia.

Colombian society is historically shaped by three main population groups: Native American peoples present prior to colonization, Spanish colonizers, and Africans brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade (Gomez 2005), alongside later waves of migration from Europe, the Middle East, and other regions. As a result of centuries of intermarriage and cultural mixing, a large proportion of the population cannot be neatly classified within a single ethnic category, yet is widely recognized as locally rooted. In this context, "indigenous" is used here in its etymological sense, referring to those who are from a place, rather than as an ethnic or juridical category.

Several empirical narratives help to clarify and justify this conceptual choice. For instance, a Colombian Muslim convert from Pasto—phenotypically perceived as "white"—explained during an interview conducted in the course of my fieldwork that his ancestries are Native American, which motivated him to author works exploring parallels between Native American cosmologies and the Islamic concept of *tawḥīd*. In his discourse, Colombian national identity is understood as the historical product of Native American, African, and European lineages, making ethnic mixture a constitutive feature of local belonging rather than an obstacle to claims of indigeneity. Another example further illustrates the limits of restricting indigeneity to Native American ancestry alone. Héctor* (substitute name), a Mexican Muslim of visibly autochthonous descent, criticizes the use of the term "*kaxlan*" among Tzotzil Muslims to designate outsiders, including Mexicans deemed insufficiently "pure" in their indigeneity. He posits that Mexican like him are also descendants of Native Americans. Moreover, he argues that such distinctions contradict Islamic universalism, which emphasizes, according to his understanding, the unity of humanity beyond ethnic or racial hierarchies.

In brief, my conceptual choice of "indigeneity" reflects an emphasis on place-based belonging and sociohistorical continuity, rather than on fixed ethnic belonging or phenotypical markers. Applied to Islam, this usage distinguishes locally rooted Latin American Muslims—either converts or descendants of converts—from more recent Muslim migrants who have arrived in Colombia over the past decades as part of transnational diasporas. Technically speaking, "indigenous" Muslims refer to individuals whose parents were born and raised in Latin America, and whose engagement with Islam does not stem from inherited national or cultural ties to historically Muslim societies.

This distinction does not deny that migrant Muslims may, over time, become locally embedded; rather, it highlights a difference in cultural relationships to Islam. While migrants often maintain symbolic, linguistic, or ritual connections to their countries of origin, indigenous Colombian Muslims generally lack preexisting cultural reference points to Islam and thus engage in processes of religious appropriation, reinterpretation, and localization from within a Latin American social framework.

Finally, decolonial perspectives provide a broader theoretical framework for this approach. From this standpoint, an excessive emphasis on race or ethnicity risks obscuring Latin America's defining historical reality: deep social, cultural, and biological mixing produced through colonialism. Rather than reifying ethnic categories, decolonial scholarship encourages a focus on shared Latin American positionalities shaped by common histories of domination and ongoing struggles for autonomy vis-à-vis foreign and Western imperial power.

For these reasons, this article adopts a critical and contextual use of the term "indigenous" to refer to locally rooted populations in Colombia whose presence predates recent Muslim migrations, regardless of their specific genealogical backgrounds. This definition functions as an analytical tool aimed at foregrounding locality, historical continuity, and social embeddedness, while remaining distinct from juridical, political, or ethnonational definitions of Indigenous peoples. In other words, they refer to local Latin American people who converted to Islam, or whose parents did so, regardless of their ethnic belonging.

1.3. Methodological Approach

This article is based on multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus 1995) conducted between 2020 and 2024 within Muslim congregations across Colombia. The relatively limited number of Islamic centers in the country made it possible to adopt an integrative approach, aiming at capturing the diversity and dynamics of Muslim congregational life at the national level rather than focusing on a single locality. Although some activities were conducted online during the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviewees indicated that physical, in-person gatherings remain the primary space for communal worship and social interaction. It was thus possible to conduct observations and interviews in Islamic centers and other physical congregational spaces, even during the pandemic. While some mosques were closed or limited their activities, other spaces remained open and active despite official restrictions.

The primary objective of the empirical research was to map the contemporary Muslim presence in Colombia and to analyze the social composition, internal dynamics, and modes of religious transmission within Muslim congregations. A congregation can be defined as "a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering" (Chaves 2004, pp. 1–2). Given that practicing Muslims—particularly converts and individuals in the early stages of their religious trajec-

tories, tend to gravitate toward physical congregational spaces when available—mosques and Islamic centers constituted the most relevant entry points for the investigation.

The identification of congregations followed a progressive and cumulative process. Initial mapping relied on online sources and institutional websites. This was subsequently complemented by snowball sampling based on information gathered through direct contacts with Muslims encountered during fieldwork, which allowed for the identification of informal, non-institutionalized, or short-lived congregations not publicly visible online. Through this iterative process, a coherent—though necessarily provisional—national mapping of Muslim congregations was established for the first time.

Fieldwork was carried out through immersive visits to approximately twenty Muslim congregations located in major urban centers and peripheral regions, including Bogotá, Medellín, Pereira, Cali, Buenaventura, Maicao, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Guapi, and other localities. These congregations varied significantly in size, architectural form, number of participants, theological orientation, and organizational stability. The fluidity of the field—marked by the rapid emergence, transformation, or disappearance of certain congregations—underscored the need for a longitudinal approach attentive to changes over time rather than to static institutional configurations.

Data collection relied primarily on participant observation and on in-depth, non-directive, and informal interviews inspired by the approach of the "comprehensive interview" (Kaufmann 1996). Interviews were conducted with converts, descendants of converts, migrant Muslims, congregational leaders, and occasional attendees, allowing for a nuanced understanding of individual trajectories, collective practices, and internal negotiations of religious authority and legitimacy. Rather than standardized questionnaires, conversational interviews privileged reflexivity, narrative depth, and the emic categories mobilized by interlocutors themselves.

The analysis is based on several periods of fieldwork conducted in Colombia between 2020 and 2024. The research combines participant observation with different types of qualitative interviews. In total, 37 in-depth interviews were conducted with Muslims across multiple Colombian locations, including Buenaventura, Cali, Medellín, Bogotá, Cartagena, and Barranquilla, among others. These interviews were complemented by three interviews with academic specialists of Islam in Latin America, 58 shorter informal interviews with members of Muslim communities encountered during fieldwork, and approximately 15 additional online conversations. Respondents were aged between 16 and 70 and included both men and women. This qualitative material was enriched by repeated periods of immersion and participant observation within local Muslim congregations in the abovementioned locations.

Beyond congregational mapping, fieldwork revealed significant variations in the social composition of Muslim communities. While some congregations were predominantly attended by recent migrants or members of long-established Lebanese diasporas, others were composed mainly of local converts and their descendants. This distinction also extended to leadership structures: although most imams and religious authorities were foreign-born, a limited but growing number of congregations were led by locally rooted figures who had themselves converted to Islam.

This configuration—characterized by the central role of converts in shaping congregational life—constitutes a distinctive feature of Islam in Colombia and provides a privileged empirical lens through which to examine the emergence of an "indigenous" Islam. By combining multi-sited ethnography, participant observation, and qualitative interviews, this study seeks to analyze not only the motivations and conditions of conversion, but also the broader processes through which Islam is localized, reinterpreted, and socially embedded in the Colombian context.

Nevertheless, this approach has certain limitations. Many Colombian Muslims, particularly converts, live far from other co-religionists or mosques and practice their faith independently while maintaining contact with fellow believers via social media or telephone. Another limitation is the growing role of the internet as a religious and community space, which has hosted both Islamic teachings and become a form of virtual sociability, particularly over the last years. These virtual spaces have also been explored in this study, but given their fluid and transnational nature, the analysis remains indicative rather than exhaustive.

2. Understanding "Conversions" and Development of Local/Autochthonous Muslim Presence in Colombia

2.1. The Genesis of Contemporary Muslim Communities in Colombia

As in other Latin American contexts, the presence of Islam in Colombia can be traced back to several distinct historical moments. However, these early forms of Islamic presence did not lead to lasting institutional or communal continuity. Contemporary Muslim communities in Colombia are therefore not the direct continuation of these earlier episodes, but rather the outcome of more recent processes that emerged from the second half of the twentieth century onward. While this section focuses primarily on macro-level historical developments, the empirical richness of the fieldwork is illustrated in greater detail in the following sections that are devoted to local practices and conversion motivations.

A first, marginal, and largely invisible Islamic presence dates back to the period of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Among the migrants who crossed the Atlantic from the Iberian Peninsula were Moriscos and, to a lesser extent, individuals from neighboring regions such as the Maghreb. Suspected of practicing Islam clandestinely, these populations were subject to persecution by the Inquisition and forced to conceal their religious practices (Cook 2016; Chitwood 2021, pp. 49–74). As a result, this early Islamic presence remained highly marginalized and was largely absorbed through coercive assimilation.

A second historical influence stems from the transatlantic slave trade. A significant proportion of enslaved Africans deported to the Americas were Muslims (Diouf 1998; Gomez 2005). While this presence was more substantial in regions such as Brazil, historical evidence also points to Muslim individuals of African descent in Colombia. As in other parts of America, however, enslaved Muslims were generally forced to abandon their religious practices and assimilate into the dominant Catholic culture, leaving little institutional or communal continuity (Castellanos 2007, pp. 42–47). In fact, for centuries, only Catholicism was politically and socially legitimized in Colombia, as in other Latin American regions (Cook 2016). Even Protestant churches were perceived as heretical and were regularly subjected to strong repression (Bastian 1994). Despite a gradual political opening from the 19th century onwards, it was not until the 20th century that new non-Catholic religious communities, including Muslim ones, were able to organize without fear of popular marginalization.

A third influence emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with the migration of populations from the declining Ottoman Empire—commonly labeled as *Turcos*—originating mainly from the Levant (present-day Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine). Although these migrants were predominantly Christian, a minority were Muslim. In several Latin American countries, particularly Argentina and Brazil, these Arab Muslim migrants founded the first official mosques and communal institutions at the end of the nineteenth century (Brieger and Herszkowich 2002, p. 157), and more significantly in the early twentieth century (Jozami 1996, pp. 74–76). While the Muslim congregations were organized in informal settings, the first mosques were founded in the 1930s (SESRIC 2019, p. 44). After the decline of Islamic practice among African-descendant people, the Muslim pres-

ence in Brazil has a similar pattern with Argentina following the arrival of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants. The first official mosque was built in 1929 in Sao Paulo, the Mesquita Brasil founded by the *Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana*. In Colombia, however, these early Arab migrations did not lead to the formation of stable Muslim congregations, and the first official mosque was not established until the 1990s, in the northern town of Maicao (Domínguez Portugal 2019a). Prior to the new waves of Lebanese migration starting in the 1970s, the relatively small population of Arab Muslim migrants who arrived in Colombia earlier in the twentieth century appears not to have engaged in communal worship, with Islamic practice largely confined to the private sphere (Castellanos 2007, pp. 42–47).

Importantly, none of these three historical forms of Islamic presence resulted in lasting continuity. The early Muslim populations were either assimilated or disappeared, and no direct institutional link can be identified between these early episodes and the contemporary Muslim communities. Consequently, the emergence of Islam as a visible and organized religious presence in Colombia must be traced back to the period from the 1970s onward, through two parallel and largely independent collective processes.

The earliest of these concerns the emergence of an informal Muslim congregation in the port city of Buenaventura[3], located on Colombia's Pacific coast. In the 1960s, the teachings of the Nation of Islam were introduced by a sailor arriving from Panama (Valencia Potes 2014). Resonating with the experiences of racial marginalization faced by the local Afro-Colombian population, this message attracted several dozen individuals and constituted the first organized Muslim congregation in the country, despite its distance from mainstream Islamic doctrines. In 1974, the group of approximately two hundred adherents took the form of an official organization, the *Comunidad Islámica de Colombia*, which at that time represented the country's first Islamic center (Castellanos and Neira Manrique 2009, p. 4). Subsequent encounters with Sunni Muslim travelers led the group to adopt a more "orthodox" interpretation of Islam. In the 1980s, visits by representatives of the Iranian embassy contributed to the gradual adoption of Shiism by most members of the group, a religious orientation that continues to characterize this community today (references).

The second major root of contemporary Islam in Colombia emerged through new waves of Lebanese migration to the northern Caribbean region, particularly to Maicao and the island of San Andrés, during the second half of the twentieth century (Martínez Albarracín 2018, p. 358). In Maicao, located in the arid region of La Guajira near the Venezuelan border, Lebanese Sunni migrants founded the *Asociación Benéfica Islámica* in 1979 and later established the Colegio Colombo-Árabe *Dar el Arkam* in 1987 (Cartagena Algarra 2020, p. 40). Intended to provide both Islamic education and Arabic linguistic and cultural transmission, the school illustrates the efforts of the Lebanese Muslim community in preserving its religious and cultural identity. Alongside this Sunni presence, a smaller Shiite Lebanese community also settled in Maicao and established its own congregational center traditionally named *Husainiyya* (Castellanos 2008, p. 4).

Beyond these two pioneering organizational forms—one "indigenous" and Afro-Colombian in the southwest, the other diasporic and Arab in the northeast—additional Islamic influences have gradually developed over the last decades. In Bogotá, Middle Eastern migrants founded the Asociación Benéfica Islámica in the 1980s (Castellanos 2010, pp. 127–33), while the presence of embassies from Muslim-majority countries contributed to the organization of religious activities among diplomats and expatriates. From the late 1990s and early 2000s onward, several Islamic centers were established in major cities, often jointly attended by migrants and local converts (Castellanos 2010).

In parallel to these migratory dynamics, individual conversions to Islam increased from the 1980s onward across the country. These conversion trajectories, initially scattered and isolated, progressively contributed to the emergence of locally rooted Muslim

communities, particularly in urban centers. Moreover, new migration waves have brought Muslims from a broader diversity of Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan, Egypt, or Morocco. Ultimately, over the last two decades, the arrival of proselytizing Islamic organizations in Colombia has changed the religious landscape of Muslim communities throughout the country by importing diverse religious streams and ideologies from abroad in the name of "orthodox" Islam. Since then, diverse interpretations of Sunnism, including various streams of Salafism, Sufism, alongside with Turkish Islamic movements, Tabligh Jamat and its Deobandi theology, have competed for the allegiance of indigenous Colombian Muslims, whose recent entry into Islam frequently generates a heightened concern for religious authenticity.

Based on this historical and ethnographic analysis, this study identifies five distinct social and historical pathways through which Islam has been introduced and has taken root in contemporary Colombia. These pathways—summarized in Table 1—constitute the main processes through which a Muslim presence has been formed at the national level.

Table 1. Social and historical pathways of contemporary Islamic presence in Colombia.

Pathway (Source of the Islamic presence in Colombia)	Area	Period
Collective conversions among Afro-Colombian communities	Buenaventura Cali Guapi	From the 1960s (Nation of Islam) and from the 1980s (Sunnism and Shiism)
Arab (Levantine) migration (diaspora)	North (Maicao) Bogotá	From the 1970s/80s
Individual conversion trajectories	Entire country	From the 1980s
Recent waves of migration from Muslim-majority countries	Major cities	From the 2000s
The arrival of proselytizing actors and movements	Major cities	From the 2010s

In addition to these pathways, more recent dynamics point to the growing influence of the United States in shaping contemporary forms of Islamic affiliation in Colombia. Firstly, several documented cases involve Latin Americans who converted to Islam while living in the United States and were subsequently deported, including individuals who embraced Islam during periods of incarceration in U.S. prisons. Dozens of such trajectories have been identified, particularly in the region of Buenaventura, though similar cases can be observed elsewhere in the country. For instance, a young Venezuelan man currently living in Medellín—who converted to Islam while residing in the United States—now regularly attends a local mosque in order to continue practicing a form of Islam initially encountered in the U.S. context.

Secondly, Muslim travelers from North America and Western Europe have, in recent years, increasingly attended and occasionally participated in congregational life in Colombia. While often temporary, these encounters contribute to the transnational circulation of religious practices, discourses, and forms of sociability, further shaping the local configurations of Islam in Colombia.

2.2. Mapping of the Current Muslim Congregations

Muslim congregations—whether mosques, Islamic centers, or informal gathering spaces—constitute the primary sites where Muslims connect, practice their faith, and collectively sustain religious life. As such, the study of congregations is central to understanding both the presence of Islam in Colombian society and the ways in which it is locally lived and organized.

It is important to distinguish congregations from mosques. Historically, mosques often require substantial financial, institutional, and symbolic resources, whereas congregations more broadly reflect the local organization and collective presence of Muslims, even in the absence of formal infrastructure. Prior to the 1990s, for instance, Colombia had no officially established mosques, yet Muslim congregations already existed. Similar patterns can be observed in Brazil, where the first mosque was built in 1929, despite the existence of organized congregational life several decades earlier.

Based on fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2024, this research identified approximately thirty Muslim congregations across Colombia. Nevertheless, the rapid emergence, transformation, and disappearance of some mosques and Islamic centers complicates any attempt to produce a definitive or static cartography of Islamic places of worship and gathering. By contrast, older and more established mosques tend to display greater institutional stability and longevity over time.

These congregations vary significantly in size, religious orientation, and social composition. Some are predominantly attended by migrants or members of Arab diasporas, while others consist mainly of local "indigenous" Muslims—converts to Islam and, in some cases, their children. Most congregations, however, are socially mixed, bringing together local converts and migrants from diverse backgrounds. Table 2 provides an overview of selected congregations and highlights these patterns of distribution and attendance.

Table 2. Distribution of Islamic Congregations in Selected Colombian Areas in 2024.

Location	Name	Religious Stream	Attendance
Medellin	Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellin (Mezquita Belén)	Sunni (Mixed)	Mixed
	Mezquita As-Salam	Sunni (Salafi Sururi)	Mixed
	Mezquita Ahl-us-Sunnah	Sunni (Salafi Madkhali)	Indigenous
	Centro Islamico El Encuentro	Sunni (Neo-Traditionalist/Sufi)	Indigenous
	Fundación Cultural Islámica Ahlul Bayt	Shiite (Twelver)	Mixed
Cali	Centro Islamico de Cali	Shiite (Twelver)	Indigenous
	Mezquita Luz (An-Nur)	Sunni (Salafi Surûri)	Mixed
	Asociación Islámica de Jamundí	Sunni (Mixed)	Mixed
Bogotá	Mezquita Abou Bakr	Sunni (Tradionalist)	Mixed
	Mezquita Al Qurtubi	Sunni (Neo-Traditionalist/Sufi)	Mixed
	Mezquita Estambul	Sunni (Salafi)	Mixed
	Mezquita Ahlul-Bayt	Shiite (Twelver)	Indigenous
	Mezquita Al-Reza	Shiite (Twelver)	Migrants
	Musalla Nur Cemaati	Sunni (Traditionalist/*Nurcu*)	Mixed
Buenaventura	Centro Cultural Islámico La Ciudad del Profeta	Shiite (Twelver)	Indigenous
	Mezquita al-Mumin	Sunni (Salafi)	Indigenous
Cartagena	Mezquita Muhammad	Sunni (Mixed)	Indigenous
	Mezquita Abu Bakr	Sunni (Mixed)	Indigenous
Maicao	Mezquita Omar Ibn Al-Jattab	Sunni (Traditionalist)	Lebanese Diaspora
Guapi	Mezquita Shia Guapi	Shiite (Twelver)	Indigenous
Pereira	Mezquita Assalam Pereira	Sunni (Mixed)	Indigenous

A minority of congregations are composed almost exclusively either of indigenous Muslims (like in Buenaventura, Cali, and Cartagena) or, conversely, of migrants and members of Arab diasporas (like in Maicao). The majority, however, are mixed, bringing together Colombian "indigenous" Muslims (converts or children of converts) and migrants of diverse origins. This mixed composition reflects both the recent history of Islam in Colombia and the ongoing interactions between locally rooted converts and transnational Islamic actors.

Interestingly, some congregations are almost entirely indigenous for two main reasons. First, certain congregations are located in geographically or socially marginalized areas where few migrants or foreign residents live or circulate. This is the case, for instance, for the mosque located on the outskirts of La Boquilla, in the suburbs of Cartagena, whose attendees are almost exclusively local Colombians. Second, a more exceptional pattern is linked to collective conversion dynamics among Afro-Colombian populations on the Pacific coast. Originating in Buenaventura and later extending to cities such as Cali and Guapi, these communities constitute rare examples of Muslim congregations composed almost entirely of converts. As such, they provide key empirical illustrations for analyzing the emergence of an indigenous Islam in Colombia.

Beyond these specific cases, the contemporary Islamic landscape in Colombia is characterized by a high degree of dispersion and diversity. Congregations are affiliated with various—and sometimes competing—transnational Islamic movements and theological orientations. This fragmentation limits institutional cohesion and hinders the formation of a unified national Muslim representation. Among converts in particular, high levels of religious mobility and experimentation—or *butinage* (Soares 2009)—are commonly observed, contributing to a fluid and dynamic religious field.

The overall religious landscape is thus highly diverse and dispersed, encompassing multiple transnational Islamic movements and local organizations. This diversity, combined with fluidity in religious affiliation and practices among converts, limits institutional cohesion, while fostering experimentation and mobility within the community. Despite its growing presence, Islam remains marginal in a country that is predominantly Catholic and increasingly influenced by Evangelical and neo-Pentecostal movements. Nevertheless, broader societal interest in alternative spiritualities, coupled with decolonial and social justice discourses, provides fertile ground for the continued growth and local adaptation of Islam in Colombia.

2.3. From Collective to Individual Conversions to Islam in Colombia

The Muslim community of Buenaventura represents a particularly instructive case, exemplifying the process of collective conversion, which remains rare not only in Colombia but across Latin America. By "collective conversion," I refer to phenomena in which small groups of people embrace Islam together within a specific and restricted geographic area, ultimately forming a congregation. In Buenaventura, long before the advent of the Internet, men and women collectively entered Islam through pre-existing social networks, eventually reaching a few hundred members (Castellanos and Neira Manrique 2009, p. 6). This occurrence is exceptional in a town largely devoid of a migrant Muslim presence.

Other instances of collective conversions in Latin America are limited. The most emblematic case is that of the Indigenous population in Chiapas, Mexico, who have converted to Islam since 1995 in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Cañas Cuevas 2006; Ismu Kusumo 2010). Another, smaller case concerns the town of Itabaianinha in the Brazilian Nordeste, where the conversion of an ex-pastor led nearly fifty local people to embrace Islam (Brodard 2023b). Despite significant geographic, social, and cultural differences, these cases share key characteristics: first, the congregations are almost entirely "autochthonous," resulting from conversion rather than migration; second, conversions occurred collectively, with members mutually influencing each other; and third, the communities developed autonomously, with minimal foreign influence, producing their own interpretations and practices of Islam.

Nonetheless, the collective conversion observed in Buenaventura remains an exception in Colombia. Individual conversions are far more common. Colombian men and women who embrace Islam typically do so as a personal journey, motivated by spiritual

search, friendship networks, marriage, interest in Arab or Islamic cultures[4], or political reasons. In recent years, exposure to Islam via the Internet has played a major role, as many interviewees reported that their first encounters with Islam and Muslims occurred online.

Understanding why and how people convert to Islam is a complex task. Biographical interviews reveal that motivations are often intertwined. Beyond the commonly narrated spiritual quest and affirmation of Islam's religious validity, cultural influences and interpersonal relationships play a major role. Based on several dozen interviews with Colombian converts, it is possible to identify a spectrum of motivations, including spiritual and intellectual curiosity, relational interests, identity formation, economic opportunity, personal and social development, and sociopolitical engagement. Because motivations are often interlinked and evolve over time, it is inappropriate to quantify respondents by single factors. Instead, the typology should be understood as indicative of potential influences driving conversion and sustaining long-term commitment to Islam.

An illustrative example involves a middle-aged Colombian woman from Medellín, who converted approximately fifteen years ago. She initially encountered Islam through a romantic relationship with a Colombian man already practicing Islam and actively involved in the community. While her initial motivation was relational and emotional, she quickly embraced the spiritual and religious validity of her new faith. Practicing Islamic rituals such as daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan, she ceased consuming alcohol and engaging in non-marital intimate relations. Publicly, she asserted that Islam had "saved" her and transformed her formerly "negative" lifestyle. At this stage, her primary motivation was pragmatic, based on concrete personal changes, with Islam serving as both guidance and protection against psychological and social challenges.

Over time, her commitment was further strengthened through activism and engagement, which allowed her to develop meaningful relationships within the local Muslim community. Nevertheless, she experienced crises that challenged her faith and optimism. The emergence of new religious actors in town, offering divergent interpretations of Islam, prompted doubts. Interpersonal disappointments within the community led her to critique local Muslim social life. While she never abandoned her belief in Islam itself, she withdrew from communal practice, choosing to observe Islam privately at home. At one point, she even contemplated leaving Islam for an evangelical Christian congregation, drawn by the prospect of stronger social bonds and communal warmth. In this context, religious choice was driven as much by the quest for community and positive social relations as by spiritual or doctrinal motivations.

This example demonstrates that multiple, evolving factors can drive both conversion and continued engagement in Islam, while also allowing for religious mobility. In many cases, it is impossible to precisely delineate the causes of conversion or the factors that sustain adherence, or, conversely, prompt disengagement.

To illustrate the diversity of motivations behind individual conversions to Islam in Colombia, the following table summarizes the main factors identified through biographical interviews with converts. While motivations often overlap and evolve over time, this typology highlights the most recurrent patterns reported by respondents.

Regarding this framework, it is important to note that most cases involve multiple, intertwined motivations. Moreover, not all the motivations listed in Table 3 are considered equally legitimate within the community. The most widely accepted motivation is the first factor—a spiritual and religious quest—as Islam only recognizes conversions grounded in faith and sincerity. Unsurprisingly, this motivation is therefore emphasized in most narratives and discourses, while others tend to be understated. Only in-depth interviews allowed researchers to identify additional motivations—sometimes less openly acknowledged, such as economic interests or aspirations for upward mobility—that played a sig-

nificant role in some conversion trajectories. Although transnational Islamic movements and foreign missionaries have contributed to the diffusion of Islamic teachings in Latin America over the last two decades, most interviewees in this study described their conversion primarily as the outcome of personal spiritual quests and interpersonal relationships rather than direct missionary activity.

Table 3. Main Motivations for Converting to Islam among Colombian new Muslims.

Motivation Category	Details	Frequency
Spiritual-intellectual	Search for faith, monotheism, rupture with Christian dogma	High
Relational	Influence of friends, partners, or marriage	High
Cultural Interest	Attraction to Arab culture, interest in the Arab and Muslim world	High
Economic/social opportunity	Upward social mobility, professional or economic interest	Medium
Quest for community	Desire for social belonging and inclusion in a group, peer influence	Medium
Personal/Social Reform	Ethical clarity, abstinence, search for discipline	Medium
Identity-based	Reclaiming (precolonial) roots (Africa, *Native American* cosmologies, al-Andalusian heritage), decolonial perspectives	Medium
(Socio)political	Critique of Catholic Church, rejection of Western hegemony, South-South solidarity	Low

It is also crucial to consider the broader trajectory of a Muslim's path, which begins with conversion but should be understood as an ongoing and evolving process rather than a single event. While both emic narratives and etic accounts tend to focus on conversion, the moment of formally entering Islam through the utterance of the *shahādah* represents only one point within a longer journey that extends both before and after this symbolic act. Prior to conversion, initial contacts—whether virtual or face-to-face—with Muslims, as well as exposure to Islamic ideas online or in religious circles, initiate a process of religious transformation. Following conversion, new Muslims gradually deepen their knowledge of Islam, adopting practices in daily life, negotiating social relationships, and constructing a new identity. During this process, many encounter multiple Islamic traditions that were previously unfamiliar, including diverse streams of Sunnism (Sufi, Salafi, traditionalist, reformist, etc.) and Shiism. Ultimately, some individuals continue to claim and consolidate their Muslim identity, while others may distance themselves from Islam or even leave it entirely.

In the Latin American context, high religious mobility and hybrid religiosity facilitate diverse religious experiences, including "conversions" and "reconversions" to different faiths. In addition, the concept of religious mobility or "*butinage*" (Soares 2009; Droz et al. 2016), where adherents attend multiple congregations and explore various spiritualities according to personal needs and interests, helps explain the fluidity of conversions to Islam as well as "deconversions." Indeed, while Colombians may easily cross the threshold of a mosque and, in some cases, pronounce the *shahādah*, many later explore alternative forms of spirituality, illustrating the dynamic and non-linear nature of religious affiliation in the region.

Taken together, the diverse motivations, collective and individual trajectories, and patterns of religious mobility provide the context to understand how Islam is being localized in Colombia. These processes have given rise to what can be described as an 'indigenous Islam,' manifested in communities primarily composed of local converts.

3. The Emergence of an "Indigenous Islam" in Colombia

Individual and collective conversions drove to the development of local Muslim congregations primarily composed of converts in various areas of the country. The survey of these communities permits us to identify common dynamics surrounding their recent development and assertion, which are related to their specific modality of organization, the contextualization of religious discourses and practices, and identity building.

3.1. Shifting from Foreign Islamic Dependence to Local Autonomy

While some congregations have been founded and led by foreign Muslim preachers, others are supervised by local, indigenous Muslims. As highlighted in Table 1, many congregations are mixed. Yet, they are almost systematically led by migrant Muslims, who were not born nor raised in Latin America. Only the congregations that host a wide majority of locals are likely to be led by indigenous Imams. This question of leadership and dependency from external sources of guidance incites some local Muslims to educate themselves through intense religious training, most likely in Muslim majority countries such as Turkey and Indonesia.

The driven rationale is that local, autochthonous Muslim converts become knowledgeable enough to religiously lead the community, assuring congregation prayers, education, and guidance. Internationally trained local Muslims are theoretically expected to access leadership positions. By doing so, the communities would free themselves from external and foreign dependency and subordination by having their own local leaders. Indeed, several convert Muslims complain about foreign hegemonies on local Muslim communities, deploring that external cultural norms are imposed in the name of religion. In reaction, they insist on autonomy through a process of liberating from foreign leadership and influences. But this expectation is generally not possible unless local communities and indigenous Muslims gain enough religious skills and knowledge. In the meantime, they remain dependent from foreign Imams and leaders. After some patiently became educated and eventually acquired a sufficient level of Islamic proficiency, they might tend to claim autonomy on their own congregations.

Yet, this will is usually hampered by the paradoxical situation this dependency created. First, indigenous Muslim converts had to study Islam from a "source" that is almost unavoidably grounded in a specific ideological and theological stream. Instead of studying the so-called or supposed 'universal' Islam, they study the Salafi interpretation of Islam or the Twelver Shiite interpretation of Islam, just to name a few. Once back home, their religious education is strongly influenced by those specific worldviews and theologies. Therefore, despite the will to claim autonomy and rupture with external forms of religiosity, they remain stuck in localized and historicized expressions of Islam coming from other countries, theologically depending on scholars of Qom in Iran or scholars from Saudi Arabia. Secondly, because of a difficult economic situation, they often depend on external sources of funding and therefore remain partially dependent on foreign entities.

This results in a continuing tension between global, transnational networks and authority, and local claims and expectations for autonomy in several indigenous Muslim congregations. However, the latter still struggle to localize Islamic practices and contextualize religious norms and discourses, which contributes to nourish the dynamic discursive tradition of Islam in innovative and relevant ways.

3.2. Localizing Practice: Contextualizing Religious Discourses

Islam, understood as dynamic discursive tradition (Asad 2009), entails both the continuity/permanence of its fundamental principles and the evolution of its secondary aspects according to the changing context in which it takes place. In this lens, Islam can briefly

be conceived, very concretely, as the intersection between the reference to the scriptures and past tradition—or the *Sunnah*—and a concrete community context where it takes place (Alatas 2021). It thus entails both stability and adaptation, continuity and evolution.

This claim is particularly relevant in the Latin American context, in which Islam has recently been introduced from outside through various and diverging influences. We then witness a double movement: first, Islamic thoughts and discourses are imported and replicated; secondly, they are partially adapted according to the local contexts. In the first step, communities replicate Islamic religiosities from other sociocultural contexts. This implies the imitation of both the specific doctrinal/ideological streams that are transplanted in Latin America and the cultural and social habits related for instance to Pakistan or Egypt contexts. In the second step, some leaders or members of indigenous Muslim congregations start deciding that embracing Islam does not necessarily mean to adopt foreign cultures, and that every culture can be compatible with Islam as long as prohibited actions are removed. Moreover, they eventually realize that what was advertised to them as the unique orthodox expression of Islam is situated in specific ideological, political, and cultural contexts. Therefore, their teaching of Islam is not absolute and can potentially be challenged, adapted, or improved according to local realities.

This double move permits indigenous Muslims in Colombia to contextualize and localize Islamic practices and discourses. Some may argue that Islam is central in its principle and should therefore only be transmitted, not modified nor contextualized. If such statement underscores the stability of fundamental dimensions in Islam, it forgets the concrete lived theologies that take different forms according to the context. While the core dogma, rituals, and practices remain identical—for instance, the practice of the five mandatory daily prays—other secondary aspects are constantly subject to negotiation by the community. Generally, the differences in religious practices between Muslim communities depends on the prioritization of certain norms—or what is deemed important—rather than the discussion of *fiqh* (Islamic law). As an illustration, some congregations emphasize the salience of the veil for Muslim women while others tolerate their members not following this practice, without denying its compulsory character in the mainstream Islamic interpretations. Thus, their argument is that some practices are paramount and other secondary, and that because of the specific context of Latin America, the accent should be put on fundamental things such as prayer, the abstinence of illegal consumption, solidarity and good behavior. The same argument also appears in relation to *halal* meat consumption, with common interpretations permitting non-slaughtered meat as long as it does not contain pork.[5] Finally, some indigenous congregations develop their own Islamic culture through the emphasis of specific norms and practices. It is arguable that such a tendency is not specific to Latin America but applies more broadly in any new context where Islam is spread and adopted as a local faith through the mediation of local religious authorities.

An interesting example of an indigenous Colombian Muslim community that managed to build its own autonomous identity is the group of converts who emerged from Buenaventura and spread to the neighboring areas of Cali and Guapi. These Muslim congregations are almost exclusively composed of converts or sons/daughters of converts, as are their leaders. The latter as well as a few other community members spent extensive stays abroad to study Islam according to the Twelver Shiite interpretation, such as in Buenos Aires in Argentina and Qom in Iran. Back home, they naturally lecture and guide the local Muslim congregations based on this theological and ideological approach, which represent, according to them, the orthodox expression of the faith. Nonetheless, both the leaders and congregational members are attentive to local cultural and political elements. In Cali's mosque, the picture of Khomeini is hung on the wall of a public room aside the portrait of Malcolm X. Similar mixtures of references to religious Iranian authorities such

as Khomeini and Khamanei and figures of Malcolm X are also illustrated in other religious premises of the community in Buenaventura. Although the congregation has definitely distanced itself to the sectarianism of the Nation of Islam, it still claims its Afro-centricity in politics and culture and considers Malcolm X as a key leader and inspiration. Beyond the symbols, the Imams' discourse insists on the struggle against racism and discriminations, as well as on the salience of political and social engagement. Aside with the Iranian Shiite doctrinal and political teachings, the legacy of US-developed Black activism through Nation of Islam influence has continuously influenced the political and social stance of the community. Friday's prayer sermons as well as other talks thus illustrate this influence by addressing Colombian social and political issues such as violence, inequality, racism, or corruption. In brief, this mixing of Iranian and Afro-American influences has resulted in the indigenization and localization of Islam in a new framework.

In this regard, the insistence on social and political engagement as being a central part of Islam indicates a contextualization of religious discourses in line with local living realities. Communities trying to make sense of Islam in their concrete living environment do not aim to change religious principles and norms; rather, they prioritize the ones deemed to be relevant and important. This prioritization of certain norms illustrates in itself an active role in reshaping Islamic theology considering the changing and evolving contexts in which Muslims live, as this has arguably always been the case since the birth of Islam. In practice, such processes of localization take multiple forms. In some Shiite congregations, for instance, community outreach activities organized during the Christmas season distribute food packages inspired by traditional Colombian Christmas cuisine, thereby embedding Islamic charity practices within locally meaningful forms of social solidarity. Friday sermons (*khutba*) frequently address issues such as racism, social inequality, and violence affecting Afro-Colombian populations, situating Islamic ethical teachings within the broader Colombian social context. Likewise, some local religious leaders encourage converts to maintain participation in family celebrations associated with Christian traditions when these gatherings serve to preserve family ties, a stance that contrasts with the stricter positions usually adopted in several Salafi congregations. Moreover, everyday congregational life also reflects these processes of adaptation through the presence of Colombian culinary traditions in communal meals and through the participation of some Afro-Colombian Muslims in local cultural or religious festivities linked to Afro-descendant heritage. The adaptation of dietary rules, gender norms, community gatherings, and festive rituals reflects the indigenous Colombian's reinterpretation of Islamic norms through local realities, which clearly denotes their appropriation and localization of Islam in their living context.

3.3. Identity Aspects: Blending Multiple Belongings and Hybrid Culture

The emergence of an indigenous Islam in Latin America also directly the question of identity. Claiming local indigeneity and Islam at the same time supposes harmony between both spheres of belonging. By adopting Islam as a new faith or even a new of life, new Latin American Muslims do not negate their local identity, nor their belonging to the broad Latin American "civilization". By contrast, they not only argue that both are compatible, but also often insist on the relevance to be both Muslim and Latin American at the same time. Nonetheless, this combination of multiple belongings and identities under a harmonic construction is not always free from tension and struggle.

In Medellin, Ricardo* (substitute name), a middle-age educated man from a middle-class family, embraced Islam about fifteen years ago following autonomous studies on politics and the Middle East, and lately the Muslim world and the main ideas of Islam. This independent journey eventually led him to join various Islamic congregations in Colombia

and even spent a few weeks in Qom, Iran, for religious training. Years later, he distanced himself from the local Muslim communities arguing for cultural independence. One of the main critiques he addressed to the Islamic centers, mosques, and more broadly, the Muslim congregations of Colombia is the "mistake of Arab, Pakistani, and other Islamic centers to impose their cultures as religious norms"[6]. Ricardo's experience thus expresses a deep discomfort following his feeling that he had been pushed to embrace foreign cultural identities in the name of Islam. He assumes that real Islam is universal and therefore accommodates all cultures, including Latin American, and posits that religion—or Islam—should be dissociated from culture. According to him, it should be possible to embrace Islam while maintaining one's own culture and without adopting foreign norms. Later, Ricardo disengaged from Islamic practice and communal life due to relational disappointments and sectarian divisions. Although he stated that he continues to believe in the same doctrine, he no longer wishes to affiliate himself with the Muslim community.

Whereas Ricardo failed to find a Muslim congregation that, according to his criteria, embraced local Latin American identities, others have collectively built their own communities, fostering a strong attachment to local culture alongside a deep commitment to Islam. Such congregations appear more sustainable and resilient, as they do not generate identity tensions between different forms of belonging among their members. Loyalty to and inclusion in the Ummah are not antithetical to national and local affiliations; on the contrary, many would argue that they mutually reinforce and complement one another. This is notably the case of the Afro-Colombian Muslim community originating in Buenaventura mentioned above. Emphasizing their ancestry as descendants of enslaved African populations deported to Colombia, some argue that their conversion to Islam represents a reconnection with their precolonial African roots. In this regard, the statement of one of the study's respondents—a Colombian convert from Buenaventura—helps to illustrate this dynamic: after migrating to Africa, he claimed that he had "eventually realized the dream of his ancestors: going back to Africa." Here, conversion to Islam appears as a pathway toward the (re)discovery and revalorization of African heritage.

Another cultural expression that merges Islam with pre-existing urban and local references can be observed in the gradual emergence of "Islamic hip-hop" in Latin America, including in Colombia. Islamic references entered Latin American hip-hop largely through U.S. influences, notably the Five Percenters movement, as well as through the historical figure of Malcolm X, a prominent African American convert to Islam whose life and legacy are frequently highlighted by North American rap artists (Paz Tella 2000). Although this connection between Islam and hip-hop is more established and documented in the Brazilian context—more specifically in the peripheries of São Paulo (Paz Tella 2000; Hébert 2008; Aidi 2014)—similar narratives can also be found, to a lesser extent, in Colombia. In Medellín, Abdel Alejandro Quintero Rivera (known by his stage name, Abdelhiphop) explains that exposure to U.S. hip-hop—particularly through the messages of the Five Percenters and the dissemination of Malcolm X's biography—ultimately led him to embrace Islam. Since his conversion, he has become an active member of one of the city's Muslim congregations, where he studies Islam under the guidance of a *shaykh*. Nevertheless, he continues to write and perform rap music, which he regards as a positive and meaningful form of engagement, capable of conveying social and political messages.

Following his conversion, his musical production has evolved to align with his religious convictions, offering moral guidance and the transmission of wisdom. Notably, the majority of his audience consists of local, non-Muslim Colombians. His spiritual message remains sufficiently broad to resonate with individuals for whom spirituality and belief in God are significant, even if they do not identify as Muslim. While his lyrics occasionally incorporate explicit Arabic and Islamic references—such as the expression *al-ḥamdu*

li-llāh—they are written in accessible Spanish, allowing them to speak to a wide audience without requiring prior exposure to Islam. In his music video *Sumahia*, the rapper appears wearing a *kufi* and a *qamīs*, garments commonly associated with "Islamic" dress. Another of his song is entitled *Taqwa*, an Islamic concept meaning God consciousness. Although his case remains unique within the Colombian context, it resonates with the emergence of "Islamic" hip-hop in Sao Paolo, Brazil, through the case of the ethno-religious references of the rap group Posse Hausa and the conversion of some of its members to Islam (Hébert 2008, pp. 162–63).

Another distinctive expression of the interaction between Islam and local urban subcultures in Colombia points not to religious syncretism, but rather to a form of cultural mixing and localized appropriation. In this context, the term syncretism appears inadequate, as no doctrinal or theological fusion is taking place. Instead, what emerges is a culturally situated mode of embodying Islam that differs significantly from patterns commonly observed in other geographical contexts.

Tattoos, which are highly prevalent among urban youth cultures, are generally proscribed within dominant Islamic normative frameworks. Nevertheless, in Colombia it is not uncommon to encounter male converts to Islam who display tattoos featuring Arabic inscriptions. In Medellín, for instance, one convert bears on his forearm the Arabic inscription *Allāhu akbar*, accompanied just below by the word KILLUMINATI in Latin script. Others have chosen to tattoo Arabic calligraphy on their shoulders or arms, in some cases including verses from the Qurʾān. Rather than signaling religious syncretism, these practices reflect a culturally embedded negotiation of religious identity, in which pre-existing urban aesthetics and global hip-hop references intersect with Islamic symbols. This phenomenon suggests the emergence of a distinctly Latin American, or "indigenous," Islam, shaped by local histories, urban cultures, and transnational flows, and articulated in ways that differ markedly from the forms of Islamic expression typically documented in Europe.

4. Conclusions: Colombian Muslims and the Global Ummah

Unlike many cases observed in Western Europe (Le Pape et al. 2017; Brodard 2020; Nollert and Sheikhzadegan 2023), conversion to Islam among Colombians generally does not generate acute identity tensions. Rather, belonging to Islam and to Latin America tends to be experienced jointly, without contradiction. Being Muslim and being Latino(a) are not perceived as mutually exclusive identities, but as compatible and often mutually reinforcing. A Muslim from Medellín who converted more than a decade ago recently stated on social media[7]:

> "*I reflect on the entire process I have gone through to become who I am. I am grateful to Allah for having made me Colombian; I love my country and my culture. He enabled me to develop my artistic abilities through hip-hop, which was born in the Bronx, and He gave me Islam as a spiritual path.*"

Such statements are common and illustrate the emergence of an indigenous Colombian Islamic identity, and more broadly, a Latin American one.

This article has argued that the contemporary Muslim presence in Colombia is largely shaped by local actors, converts and their descendants, rather than by migration alone. Through individual and collective conversions, indigenous Muslims have become central to the development of local congregations and to the contextualization of Islamic discourses and practices in Colombian society. In this sense, Colombian Islam is not merely imported but actively reinterpreted, embodied, and negotiated through local histories, cultural references, and social conditions.

From a decolonial perspective, this process can be understood as part of a broader effort to reconnect Islam with local epistemologies and identities historically marginalized

by colonial frameworks (De Sousa Santos 2014). Afro-Colombian Muslims often articulate that converting to Islam is a return to African roots disrupted by slavery; converts with Native American backgrounds draw parallels between *tawḥīd* and non-dualist pre-Columbian cosmologies; mestizo Muslims may valorize *al-Andalus* as an alternative symbolic genealogy to Spanish Catholic colonial heritage. These narratives do not reject Islam's idea of universality but rather inscribe it within Latin American histories of hybridity, resistance, and cultural mixing. Together, these diverse articulations illustrate what is distinctive about the Colombian Muslim experience: Islam is locally grounded, hybridized, and engaged with the country's historically marginalized epistemologies, cultures, and identities.

At the same time, the emergence of an indigenous Islam in Colombia is not without tensions and challenges. Local Muslim communities remain numerically small and institutionally fragile. Many congregations experience fluctuations in attendance, leadership changes, and even disappearance over time. While conversions are frequently highlighted by community leaders, ethnographic evidence shows that religious disengagement and mobility are also common, reflecting broader Latin American patterns of fluid religiosity. Sustaining congregational life therefore remains an ongoing and contested issue.

Key challenges identified in this study include negotiating religious knowledge and legitimacy within mixed congregations composed of migrants and indigenous Muslims; constructing a plural identity that combines local cultural elements with Islamic norms and references; and contextualizing religious discourses and practices in ways that resonate with Colombian social realities while maintaining a sense of belonging to the global Ummah. These negotiations are particularly salient given the presence of diverse, and sometimes competing, Islamic transnational movements, each claiming normative authority and authenticity.

Another major challenge concerns the position of indigenous Muslim communities at the margins of the Muslim world. Geographically distant from traditional centers of Islamic learning and authority, Colombian Muslims have historically lacked institutional continuity, which partly explains why earlier Muslim presences in the region eventually disappeared. Yet, a crucial difference distinguishes the contemporary situation from the past. Today, indigenous Muslim communities are deeply connected to the global Ummah through digital technologies, online religious content, transnational networks, and increased mobility and travel. These connections enable access to religious knowledge, global debates, and symbolic belonging in ways that were unimaginable just a few decades ago.

It is precisely this articulation between strong local rootedness and unprecedented global connectivity that may offer contemporary indigenous Muslim communities in Colombia greater chances of durability. Rather than reproducing imported models, Colombian Islam appears to be developing as a situated, hybrid, and adaptive form of religious life, simultaneously local and global, Latin American and Islamic. In doing so, it contributes not only to reshaping Muslim identities in Colombia, but also to broader discussions on religion, decoloniality, and the plural futures of Islam in its geographical peripheries. By documenting the emergence of locally rooted Muslim congregations shaped largely by converts and their descendants, this article contributes to the growing scholarship on Islam in Latin America and offers new empirical insights into the processes through which Islam becomes indigenized in non-Muslim-majority societies. More broadly, it highlights how the negotiation between local cultural frameworks and transnational Islamic references shapes contemporary Muslim identities at the geographical margins of the global Ummah.

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Informed Consent Statement: Oral informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions, as they consist of qualitative field materials (interview and observation notes) containing potentially identifiable information about research participants.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The Pew Research Center's most recent update covering the period 2010–2020 does not substantially modify the earlier estimate and similarly suggests a figure of approximately 10,000 Muslims in the country in 2020. Other more recent figures occasionally cited in public discussions appear to be largely speculative and are not based on systematically collected data; for this reason, they are not used in this article (Pew Research Center 2025).

2 In this article, "autochthonous" is used in the sense of locally originating or long established in a given region or country. It does not refer to "Indigenous" peoples in the sense used in settler-colonial contexts, nor does it imply a specific ethnic category, but simply denotes populations considered locally rooted.

3 Eighty-five percent of the population of Buenaventura is considered Afro-Colombian, descendants of African slaves (De Roux 2010, p. 10).

4 Several interviewees explained that their encounter with Islam was initially triggered by a broader cultural interest in the Arab and Muslim world. This interest was shaped by different factors: some mentioned exposure to documentary videos on Muslim societies, mostly set in Arab countries; others referred to the influence of Turkish TV series that sparked curiosity for what they perceived as "foreign" Muslim cultures; and others described a more intellectual trajectory, grounded in readings on Middle Eastern history, religion, or politics. In most cases, Arab and Middle Eastern contexts were more visible and accessible through media and cultural products, which may explain why these were cited more frequently than other Muslim-majority regions.

5 Contrary to widespread ideas within Muslim communities, some scholar opinions (*fatawa*) consider the meat of the people of the book—the Jews and the Christians—lawful.

6 Email correspondance, January 2020.

7 Facebook post, December 2025.

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