The Typology of Imams in the West and Imams in Poland: Past and Present

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Abstract

Researchers of Islam in the West have noticed that imams working since the 1950s in Western Europe or the United States assume far more responsibilities than their counterparts in traditional Muslim societies. Consequently, further research had to identify and specify the types of imams who perform their service in the West – their most complete typology is the one developed by Niels Valdemar Vinding. However, besides Finland where the Muslim Tatars have lived since the nineteenth century, the classification does not include imams from areas inhabited by the indigenous Muslims.

This study is an attempt to check if the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars living in Poland who have had their imams for centuries would fit into Vinding’s typology and if this typology also would work in a diachronic perspective. Literature on the subject was the basis for the research into the situation of imams in the past. Interviews with representatives of particular Muslim organizations served as the basis for the research into the present-day situation.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims in Europe, imam, religious leadership, mosque, Poland, Polish-Lithuanian Tatars

Słowa kluczowe: islam, muzułmanie w Europie, imam, przywództwo religijne, meczet, Polska, Tatarzy polsko-litewscy

1 This text uses simplified English transcription for terms of Arabic origin.
Introduction

Religious leadership is a constituent of every community’s religious life. What is crucial is who assumes the leadership, how it is exercised, what is its educational base, and liturgical role. The Polish-Lithuanian Tatars living in Poland have had their imams for centuries. Still, despite extensive academic literature on the Tatars, their history, and the present day, the research on imams or religious leadership is scarce. Undeniably, the teachings of imams largely influence the faith, its practice, and the way the believers function in society. Thus, their education and appointment process are essential, and if they come from outside of the local community, they can change the faith of their followers.

In the West,1 there have already been significant studies on the Muslim religious leadership, including imams, as they are considered an essential element of, among others, the integration of immigrant communities. Many of the imams have been brought from abroad, which influences their proclaimed approach to religion. Thus, it is vital to investigate the situation of Polish imams in view of the research in the West: whether the Western typologies of imams can be used to describe their counterparts, whether the classifications designed for communities of immigrant origin also work for indigenous Muslims, and whether the continuing presence of Islam (as is the case of Poland) has in any way influenced the way imams have been working.4

Who is an imam?

Before presenting the results of the classification of imams in Western (European or American) Muslim communities, it is crucial to understand who an imam is, his historical and contemporary role among the traditional followers of Islam, and what distinguishes his service.

The word ‘imam’ is of Arabic origin and appears in the Qur’an, the sacred book of Muslims, 12 times,5 mostly as a leader for the people (2:124, 9:12, 21:73), but also, i.a., a guide (11:17; 17:71) or a model (15:79).

Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632) was himself a religious leader, namely an imam of the emerging Muslim community, but also a political and military leader.6 Consequently, after his death, political leaders, also called imams at that time, conducted prayer (salat), especially the most significant Friday prayer with a sermon (khutba). It changed during the Abbasid rule (750–1258) after the conquest of Persia in the middle of the eighth century when the caliphs and other political leaders discontinued regular conducting of prayers. Since the middle of the ninth century, prayers were led by the chosen from among “those learned in religious matters,” while the ruler did it only for special occasions.7 When an imam no longer represented political power, he “was in general in charge of the divine service. […] It was his duty to conduct every salat.”9 He was assigned to a given mosque (masjid) where he served and maintained order.

Thus, in Sunni Islam the word ‘imam’ has several meanings, starting from a political leader of a given community, someone who just performs a prayer for a congregation, to someone who is appointed as an imam of a given mosque or, in general, a person learned in religious matters.9

Nowadays, however, the term is regularly and almost exclusively used when referring to somebody performing religious service in mosques or prayer rooms (musalla), who has been selected for the position and meets the requirements of Muslim law for this function: it should be a mature and healthy man, without any apparent disability, of an appropriate disposition, and with required religious knowledge.10 The election often entailed a given congregation or an appointment from state authorities in the area. Since the beginning of Islam, there was no agreement as to whether such imams should receive remuneration for their service; over time, the practice of paying them from religious endowments (waqfs) developed, while in the Ottoman Empire they received the status of officials and, in addition to prayers, conducted weddings or funerals, and registered newborns.11 Frequently, imams were not in charge of managing the funds, the mosque’s property or its religious foundation; instead, it was the job of, e.g., local religious judges (qadi) or a group of trusted persons appointed as “the mosque’s protectors.”

The Western approach to imams tends to regard them as the Christian clergy and treat them as such. As Jane I. Smith notes, “[i]mams are often referred to by non-Muslims as ‘clergy,’ although such a term is technically incorrect because there is no ordinance as such for imams.”12

3 In the article, the West signifies Europe and North America, i.e., territories outside of areas inhabited by mostly Muslim traditional societies.
4 Literature on the subject was the basis for the research into the situation of imams in the past. Interviews with representatives of particular Muslim organizations served as the basis for the research into the present-day situation. Because of its continued presence within the Polish borders, greater emphasis was placed on the situation of imams in the Tatar community.
8 Ibidem, p. 675.
9 C. Thiele, Imame in türkisch-sunnitischen Gemeinden in Deutschland. Ihre Rolle und Bedeutung – dargestellt anhand der Situation in Hamburg, Nordhausen 2010, p. 13. In Ši’a Islam, the word ‘imam’ not only describes a leader of a community, but also imams who are descendants of the Prophet, chosen and appointed by God to lead the humanity in all aspects of life and to be perfect examples for the believers.
Imams in the West and their classification

With the influx of Muslim immigrants in the second half of the twentieth century, imams emerged in Western Europe or the United States, especially as the presence of Muslim communities became more stable in the 1970s as a result of family reunification who began to lead religious lives. However, with the stabilization of Muslim communities in the West, the organization of prayer rooms or the construction of mosques, imams start to function differently than in their countries of origin, i.e., besides conducting prayers, they perform many other duties that stem from a lack of support in local religious and legal structures. As Jane I. Smith notes,

 [...] traditionally, the imam has been only one of a range of religious leaders with specific roles to play for the Muslim community. It is only in the West, and here in America, that imams may be expected to assume all or many of the roles played by Christian (and often Jewish) leaders. While imam technically means one who leads the prayer, in the largest mosques in the United States, imams perform all the functions of full religious leadership – including preaching, pastoral counselling, business administration, and many of the other service required to make an institution function effectively.15

No wonder then that researchers have dealt with this specific situation of imams in Europe or the United States. Though, as Mohammed Hashas, Jan Jaap de Ruiter, Niels Valdemar Vinding, and Khalid Hajji notice, in the beginning, religious leadership was not a crucial topic of the research on Islam in Europe, and researchers focused rather on an “integration of second-generation immigrants, citizenship, loyalty, secularization, modernity, and representative bodies of Islam.”16

Slowly, however, there started to appear studies devoted to not only the role of imams in the integration of Muslim immigrants or in preventing the radicalization of the Muslim youth but also to more general issues, i.e., to their distinctiveness or education, to the way of building their religious authority or functioning in particular countries.17 First, researchers developed some typologies alongside other research into imams working in the West, based on differentiating between their religious authority, education and training as imams, and the distinctiveness of their institutional legitimacy, which was necessary to understand the way they function. However, the majority of studies focus on one country, narrowing the proposed division to one type of institutional legitimacy (resulting from a country-specific type of state-religion relations18), often limiting the ethnic or religious spectrum (e.g., the majority of Muslims in Germany and Austria are the Turks, and in Great Britain – Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indus19), and the resulting divisions are not general enough to apply to all imams in Europe or the United States.

The first fully developed typology of imams in the West is the study by Niels Valdemar Vinding, *Towards a Typology of Imams in the West*,20 as the author himself points out, “based on qualitative interviews with about 50 imams in Western Europe and North America (‘the West’).”21 When preparing his classification, Vinding built on existing research on imams and their divisions; next, he analysed the institutional and epistemic authority that characterizes imams in the West and then interviewed 50 out of 300 identified imams. For his interviewees, he chose imams “who had previously reflected publicly and systematically on what it means to be an imam and the challenges that come with a global, multicultural, and post-migration ‘Western’ world.”22 Table 1 (p. 84) is a result of his studies.

It is evident that Vinding’s classification covers many countries, ethnic backgrounds of Muslim communities, takes into account imams operating in different legal state-religion relations, with different legal statuses of Islam, because, e.g., in Belgium, Finland or Austria, Islam is officially recognized as religion, while in Germany, Great Britain or France, for various reasons, Islam does not have this status.23 However, besides Finland where the Muslim Tatars have lived since the nineteenth century, the classification does not include imams from areas inhabited by the indigenous Muslims. Would they fit into this classification?
As the author points out, this classification is merely a “work in progress and an invitation for further discussion on how, and according to which parameters, to systematize the study of diverse types of imams in the West.”22 Thus, an interesting question arises: whether this classification also applies to imams in those parts of Europe where Muslims have been present for so long that they are indigenous peoples, but the traditional Muslim world sees these countries as the West. With the Muslim minority present within its borders since the seventeenth century, Poland exemplifies such a region, where there have been changes in the way Muslim religious community23 operates and in its legal status; recently, since the 1980s, its ethnic composition has also changed, which must have impacted the status and functioning of imams. Will this typology also work in a diachronic perspective?

provided for by estates, mostly farmlands, made over as endowments (waqfs), as
lawfully granted to imams by the electoral documents, which served as an agreement
with the dziennat, but waqfs often did not generate enough income.29 Imams also
received remuneration for their service directly from the believers, for example, for
praying for the dead; they also collected the so-called fitra for visiting houses in the
second half of Ramadan – paid in money or nature.30

The dziennats held meetings led by the land military commander (chorąży) of
a given district (powiat), and their participants discussed not only matters related to
the community31 but also elected their imams.32 The election criteria included being
“able to learn, from a good family, and with a decent manner around the parish,”
as the imam of the Łowczyce mosque, Achmeć Assanowicz, wrote in 1820 in a memo-
rrial to the Russian authorities.33 Therefore, there were no formal requirements regard-
ing an imam’s education34; he had to be well-born, know the rules of religion, be able
to lead a prayer, recite the Qur’an, and inspire the respect of the faithful.35 As a result,
the imams sometimes did not understand the Qur’an in Arabic, although they knew it
by heart, and they had tafsirs (comments), which were translations in Polish, Belarus-
ian or Russian.36 Interestingly, an imam often was the son of the previous imam,37 for
instance, the documents prove that for 65 years, since 1791, in Studzianka the imams
came from the same Oksinski family.38 It is worth noting that at the beginning of
the Tatar settlement, but also later, in the sixteenth–seventeenth century, imams were
brought from neighbouring Muslim territories, e.g., from Crimea,39 while sometimes
young Tatars were sent to Crimea to study.40

The official status of Tatar imams was not regulated by any state law; they were
not even mentioned in any act.41 The role of an imam was not limited solely to re-
ligious duties. It is worth noting that they also acted as a community representative
before the courts and offices, administered oaths,42 and kept a register of births and
deaths.43 Thus, like a priest, an imam also took on the role of an official: recording
births, deaths, as well as officiating weddings, granting divorces and registering
them.44 The royal authorities used imams as mediators when they wanted to issue
orders to the Tatar community or collect taxes; an imam also served as a chancellor
and a notary, certifying documents or issuing certificates of noble origin.45 He was
very often entrusted with important documents and valuable property for safekeep-
ing. Imams would also serve as witnesses during significant events.46

When the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lost its independence at the end of
the eighteenth century, the lands inhabited by the Tatars came under the Russian rule.
However, not much changed for the dziennats or imams. Because of an organizational
reform of the religious life of Muslims in Russia, Polish-Lithuanian Tatars became
subordinates of the Mufti in Simferopol, but they retained their right to elect their
imams47 (formally, the nomination of an imam had to be approved by the governorate
authorities and then by the Mufti48).

Polish-Lithuanian Tatar imams in the interwar period

In 1918, after World War I, Poland regained its independence. This war was a tragedy
for the Tatar-Muslim community: mosques were burned, cemeteries destroyed, and
many Tatar families found themselves in exile, in the interior of Russia. The leader-
ship of the Mufti in Simferopol was dissolved after the Bolsheviks seized Crimea.
In 1925, the first all-Polish religious organization of Polish Muslims was estab-
lished – Muzułmański Związek Religijny w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (Muslim Re-
ligious Union in the Republic of Poland – henceforth MZR) and the first Mufti, an
orientalist Dr. Jakub Szynekiewicz, was elected. The activities of MZR were based on
local Muslim communities, of which there were 19 in the interwar period; in 1925,

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41. P. Borawski, O sytuacji wyznaniowej... op. cit., p. 52.
42. Ibidem, pp. 51–52; J. Sobczak, Położenie prawne ludności tatarskiej w Wielkim Księstwie Litew-

43. The oldest register found comes from a mosque in Nowogródek and dates back to 1784;
44. A. Konopacki, op. cit., p. 292. In the eighteenth century, registers were kept in Polish, but in the nine-
teenth century, after Poland lost independence, Russian authorities ordered to keep them in Russian
46. A. Konopacki, op. cit., p. 87. Some of the imams’ duties were modeled on their Christian neighbors,
18 imams and 12 muezzins served in these communities, in 1935: 19 imams and 22 muezzins. Initially, each of the communities was headed by the Board. However, in 1936, the Polish parliament introduced the Act on the Relations Between the State and the Muslim Religious Union. According to the Act, an imam was at the head of every community. He was elected similarly to a muezzin, his deputy and assistant, by the general assembly of members of a given religious community. Muezzins helped imams and prayed in hamlets distant from the “parochial” mosque. The upkeep of imams and muezzins was still provided for by waqf properties. Also, they received salaries from the state funds transferred by the Muftiate. They also received offerings from individual believers for a specific religious service or prayer. Imams were responsible not only for religious services, but (as they had in the past under the authority of the Muftiate in Simferopol) also served as registrars and civic officials: conducting weddings and granting divorces, keeping records and issuing marriage or birth certificates, and the like.

During their time, the MZR authorities noticed a low level of schooling among imams: they mostly had elementary education, and another imam was very often the only source of their religious knowledge. Therefore, there were attempts at further education, e.g., an internal course for younger imams and hodžas (teachers of religion; Per.-Tur. khoja). Another MZR initiative was sending young Tatars to study in Muslim centres abroad. Sending Tatar students to the pre-eminent Sunni Muslim university, i.e., Egyptian Al-Azhar University, proved to be the most significant achievement. However, only one Al-Azhar graduate, Ali Ismail Wróblewski, became an imam in the Warsaw community after his return. He was also a military chaplain: a field imam for the Tatar light cavalry squadron in the Polish army. Later, young people were sent (at the Muftiate’s expense) to study in Bosnia, mostly to the madrasa by the Gazi Husein-bey mosque, a Muslim secondary school, with Arabic, Persian and Turkish, secular and theological subjects. Until World War II, three students left to study there, for instance Jusuf Konopacki returned to Poland but never became an imam.

**Contemporary imams in Poland**

After World War II, as a result of moving the Polish borders to the West, only three traditional Muslim communes remained within the Polish state (in Warsaw, Bohoniki, and Kruszniany). As a result of the resettlements that followed, the Tatars were scattered, finding themselves in the so-called Western territories without the religious infrastructure which remained in the East. Although the MZR was reactivated in 1947, the spiritual life of Muslims was not easy. Imams educated before the war performed the service; however, there were not enough of them, and with time, their numbers declined due to natural causes. On the other hand, for financial and political reasons, it was difficult for the youth to study Islam abroad. The larger Tatar communities, like in Podlasie or Gdańsk, managed to maintain a long-term service of imams. However, there were also local communities consisting of only presidents of the communities and the believers, and with temporary imams. In these cases, none of the Tatar residents had adequate education, and random individuals performed the service, often students of Arab origin, as was the case in Bydgoszcz. For a long time, the local community in Warsaw did not have a permanent imam, although Muslim members of the diplomatic corps attended the prayers and embassies of Muslim countries, particularly Egypt, at their own expense, would bring an imam to Warsaw for the Muslim religious holidays after which the imam would return to his homeland. Frequently, an employee of one of the Muslim embassies (e.g., for a long time it was an employee of the Bangladesh embassy) conducted the prayer.

Following the political changes of 1989, Poland became a democratic state with open borders; a country in which it was easier for the religious communities to operate. New legal regulations regarding state-religion relations were adopted – the foundation for the current legal and organizational situation of Islam in Poland. They introduced an easier registration of denominational organizations and, consequently, an organizational pluralism for the Muslim religious life – until that moment, only the Muslim Religious Union in the Republic of Poland was officially active.

There are currently five Muslim denominational organizations registered in Poland; imams operate only within them, and there are no independent imams. Within the frame of the MZR, there are one mufti and nine imams, each of them assigned to a mosque or a prayer room. Mufti Tomasz Miśkiewicz and two imams (Janusz Aleksandrowicz in the Kruszniany mosque and Aleksander Bazarewicz in the Bohoniki mosque) are of Tatar origin, but the mufti is the only one with formal theological education, while the other two acquired knowledge in various centres abroad, in Europe and beyond. Two imams, Rami Khayrow in the prayer room in Suchowola and Mirzogobil Radhabaliev in the prayer room in Białystok (MZR’s headquarters, where he serves together with the mufti), come from Russia and live in Poland as a result of agreements between Mufti Miśkiewicz and the Mufti of Tatarstan. These are two imams with the traditional Muslim theological education, and since Russian is, like Polish, a Slavic language, they have quickly learned the language of their community. The remaining three imams are Ismail Çaylak in the Gdańsk mosque, Vahid Ercan in the prayer room of the Tatar Cemetery in Warsaw, and Abdülkarim Gök in the prayer room of the Turkish-speaking Faith local community. These imams

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49 Often, a muezzin became imam after the death of the previous imam.
50 S. Kryczyński, op. cit., p. 172.
53 Russia was not taken into account, despite the nineteenth-century tradition of communication with its Muslim ethnic groups, as it was under the hostile Soviet rule.
54 U. Wróblewska, op. cit., p. 80. Probably because of his mainstream version of the Islamic practice from Bosnia, which differed from the practice passed on by the Tatar imams.
56 For more details see: A.S. Nalborczyk, Poland…, op. cit., pp. 305–308.
came from Turkey under the mufti’s agreement with the Turkish authorities; thus, they are traditionally theologically educated. However, because the Muslims under their care are not Turkish-speaking (besides the Fatih community), language problems happen, especially at the cemetery in Warsaw. While the imam of the Warsaw community, officially named on the MZR’s website, Aboubacar Moussa Ali, comes from Egypt, the majority of worshippers are of foreign origin, with a significant percentage of people of Arabic origin, so language is not a problem. Their previous official imam, Nezar Charif, is a Syrian with the traditional Syrian religious education, who has served in this community for many years and speaks Polish very well; he does not appear on the official MZR’s website as the imam of this community due to a conflict with the mufti.

The entire Shi’a organization is relatively small: with three imams, Polish converts to Shi’a Islam, and around 50 people attending prayers. Two younger imams, Rafal Berger and Arkadiusz Miernik, first gained knowledge from imam Mahmud Taha Zűk (a Catholic theology graduate from the Warsaw Theological Academy, in 1994, he took a monthly theological course in Tunisia), who then examined them as the chief imam. Currently, Rafal Berger is the chief imam, elected by the members of the organization. Arkadiusz Miernik continued his education in the Shi’a theological seminary abroad and now lives in London.

The second Sunni organization, Liga Muzułmańska w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (the Muslim League in the Republic of Poland – henceforth LM) registered in 2004, was founded by former students of Arab origin, their families, and converts. It has branches in several major Polish cities and its imams, usually of Arab descent, mainly come from local communities. It happens, as in the only purpose-built mosque at the LM’s disposal, that the imam comes from an Arab country (in this case, he came from Yemen, has a traditional education, and has learned Polish very quickly).57

The Act of 1936 on Relations Between the State and the Muslim Religious Union provides a possibility of establishing a Muslim ministry in the Polish Army, hospitals and prisons “as needed.” Currently, there are no Muslim chaplains permanently employed in public institutions. The reason is purely sociological, i.e., a relatively small number of Muslim citizens – 0.09–0.1 percent of the whole population.

Conclusions – does the typology of imams in the West work for the Tatars?

Researchers of Islam in the West have noticed that imams working since the 1950s in Western Europe or the United States assume far more responsibilities than their counterparts in traditional Muslim societies. Imams perform many more roles, including leading prayers, as well as preaching, pastoral counselling, mosque administration, health counselling, organizing cultural and other free-time activities for the community members, and many others. These services are similar to those performed by the Christian clergy. Consequently, further research had to identify and specify the types of imams who perform their service in the West – their most comprehensive typology is the one developed by Niels Valdemar Vinding.58

It turns out that imams working in the communities of the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars, considered as existing in the West for the traditional Muslim communities, have long been playing a role similar to that of priests. As the available historical sources show, not only did they conduct prayers, but also administrated the mosque and its waqfs, protected the goods entrusted to them, took oaths, and – in the nineteenth and early twentieth century – kept the burial, marriage, registers on a par with those maintained by the clergy of other denominations. Every imam was assigned to a given mosque and a mosque to a given congregation that lived nearby and elected the imam. It is no coincidence that in the historical sources as well as in the Muslim documents, communities of mosques are “parishes,” and imams are called “imam of such and such parish.”

As the analysis presented above demonstrates, Vinding’s typology also applies to imams working in the indigenous Muslim communities, although there is a preponderance of some types, while others are non-existent. Tatar imams “with local mosques” (or prayer rooms), according to Vinding’s typology, imams of particular Muslim communities, prevailed in the Polish-Lithuanian state. In the past, these communities (dzemiały) were separate; only in the nineteenth century, they came under the joint authority of the Muftiate in Simferopol, while remaining independent in the election of imams. Throughout this period, the education of imams was traditional, one imam learning from another, like a son from a father, making this training informal, which could mean “self-taught” in Vinding’s classification. Later, one all-Polish organization was established, the Muslim Religious Union in the Republic of Poland, but imams were still assigned to local communities and, despite attempts, only a small percentage of them received regular, formal theological education (“traditionally trained” in Vinding’s typology). Throughout the history of imams in the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish state, local communities elected their imams.

Imams currently working in Poland are still associated with specific centres or organizations, and their education varies: from informal, provided by other followers or as part of self-education, to the traditional formal education of imams brought from Muslim countries (“ambassador or network imams” in Vinding’s typology). Interestingly, the Tatars were already bringing imams-ambassadors from Crimea in the sixteenth century.

As the basis of his typology, Vinding distinguishes two types of authority: institutional and epistemic. Institutional authority is assigned to “institutional power of the employer, organization, or network that engages the imam and therefore delegates unto and authorizes the imam in his conduct and business as an imam”.59 Epistemic authority is, as Vinding notes, based on “the kind of training (formal or informal), accumulation of knowledge, or recognition of merit that demonstrate that the qualities

57 However, it turns out that due to the linguistic diversity of the Warsaw congregation (diplomats, expats, guest workers), English is also necessary.
of an individual are sufficient for him to conduct the business of an imam, regardless of what kind of employment or function as imam or chaplain he might have.\textsuperscript{39} Islamic knowledge is one of the most important sources of Islamic authority for the imam.

The functioning of imams in Poland has always been based more on the institutional authority than the epistemic authority (education and training have been and remains not that important), it was and is authorized by the community itself by election. The education of imams was usually poor; inspiring respect from the community or coming from a good family was much more vital. It was not until the twentieth century that education started to play a more significant role, but it is clear that completing formal religious education is still unnecessary.

It is therefore evident that the typology developed for imams in Western Europe and the United States also might be applied to imams working in indigenous European Muslim communities. However, in these communities, there is a preponderance of some types identified by Vinding (“imams with mosques”), while others do not occur at all (e.g., “independent imams”) or are very rare (“self-taught chaplain imams”).

References


\textsuperscript{39} Ibidem, pp. 242–243.