Islam as decolonial re-existence *vs.* PRC institutionalized Islamophobia
El islam como re-existencia decolonial *vs.* la islamofobia institucionalizada de la RPCh

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Abstract

The Uyghur population is mired in constant conflict with the authorities of the Chinese central government. This is due to the participation of part of the population –especially younger people- in local organizations associated with Islamic terrorism and often-violent activities that these groups perform against the State.

Islam (such as laws, customs, and demonstrations) is the element that the PRC instrumentally employs in legitimizing its violent and restrictive policies against the Uyghur people, in order to maintain its power over the territory and its natural resources. This is also done while publicly presenting the measures as "War on Terror" and "Modernization" of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.

In the framework of decolonial studies, this research provides a detailed overview of the current religious colonialism of the PRC, and how religion and "War on Terror" became State tools of political repression. On the other hand, it aims to present Uyghurs' territorial religious manifestations as one re-existence instrument, in opposition to the epistemicides that Beijing is committing.

Keywords: Xinjiang, Islamophobia, China, Uyghur, resistance

Resumen

La población uigur está en conflicto constante con las autoridades del gobierno central chino. Esto se debe a la participación de parte de la población, especialmente de los más jóvenes, en organizaciones locales asociadas con el terrorismo islamista y actividades a menudo violentas que estos grupos realizan contra el Estado.

El islam (entendido como leyes, costumbres y manifestaciones) es el elemento que la RPCh emplea instrumentalmente para legitimar sus políticas violentas y restrictivas contra el pueblo uigur, para mantener su poder sobre el territorio y sus recursos naturales. Esto también se hace mientras se presentan públicamente estas medidas como "Lucha contra el terrorismo" y "Modernización" de la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang.

En el marco de los estudios decoloniales, esta investigación proporciona una descripción detallada del colonialismo religioso actual de la República Popular China, y cómo la religión y la "Lucha al terrorismo" se convirtieron en herramientas estatales de represión política. Por otro lado, su objetivo es presentar las manifestaciones religiosas territoriales de los uigures como un instrumento de re-existencia, en oposición al epistemicidio que Beijing está cometiendo.

Palabras clave: Xinjiang, islamofobia, China, uigur, resistencia

1. Introduction[1]

Today, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is one of the most relevant powers in the global geopolitical landscape. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)[2] is the first region by Muslim population in the country and is considered the focus of the largest disturbances and direct attacks to the nation's security, due to the indigenous population's affiliation to the local separatist movement.

In an increasingly insistent manner, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the central government has launched a series of anti-terrorism measures, with the objective of limiting the personal freedom of the Uyghur people and developing a greater control and power over their historical region: rich in natural resources —essential for the economic growth of the country— and placed in a geostrategic position —fundamental to the Central Asian dimension of Chinese politics and trade.

> *The government is not willing to negotiate, so its way of handling the situation is repression; is to silence the speech of Uyghurs, like Professor Ilham Tohti, and all others who have risen up against the Chinese government; they are simply told that they are separatist terrorists, they jail them or they kill them* (Interviewee, field notes).

The aim of this article is to highlight the difference between terrorism and separatism, within the scope of the protest movements in XUAR, and show how the PRC's restrictive

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[2] Starting at this point, this research refers to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with the acronym XUAR, primarily when talking about the geopolitical territory as it is established and shaped by the PRC. Principally, it will use this acronym whenever it is talked about issues related to Central State-imposed politics over the territory. This usage is intentional, instead of the more used "Xinjiang" toponym, to highlight and show the official —though non real— "autonomy" of the region, as well as its official "belonging" to Uyghur people. Moreover, it uses the English transcription of the toponym of XUAR indigenous people —Uyghur, instead of any of the other six transcription existing (Uighur, Uigur, Uygur, Uighuir, Uiguir and Weiwuer)—, following the suggestion of The Terminology Normalization Committee for Ethnic Languages of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. For more information about this topic, Cfr. RFA (2010). 'Uyghur' or 'Uighur'? [Online] Retrieved from https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur-spelling-09062010161733.html [Last accessed 09.07.2019]

and epistemicidal policies towards the identity marks of Uyghur people have increased their Islamic manifestations and their belonging sentiment to the *Umma*, all whilst being forced to reject their religiosity in the public sphere and yet maintaining it as a movement of resistance in the private sphere.

Specially since the 2009 Ürümqi riots, and so forth throughout the 2010 decade, the Government accelerated their campaign against the Three Evils of separatism, extremism and terrorism, and launched the People's War on Terror, which progressively created an in-security environment for Uyghurs, and a subsequent perception of the counter-terrorism measures as state terror (Smith Finley, 2019: 2) by the Uyghur population. The securitization —read, state surveillance— of the territory involves monitoring the daily life of the citizens of XUAR; mapping their movements and associations throughout their cities with highly close-ranged military checkpoints and hi-tech facial-recognizing softwares; violent police repression of dissent, in any form; unwarranted arrests to suspiciously dangerous people; vanishing political activists and opponents; forcing up into exile to those who can exit —legally or illegally— the PRC; locking up millions of people in alleged reeducation camps. The institutional fear instilled in the citizens; the violence perpetrated against civilians; the forced re-education and abandon of identity and religious tradition; as Jo Smith Finley addresses in her article (2019: 20) "we can see that counter-terror operations in Xinjiang, as presently conducted within the state's 'de-extremification' drive, fit Blakeley's definition of state terror to a large extent." The pacification narratives —within the frame both of Global War on Terror and President Xi Jinping's "world of great harmony," plan— largely publicized in state-controlled media,

underlie the CCP need to hide a case of terror and mass detention/elimination committed by the state, to which people must resist in order to keep existing as a community —and as individuals.

The space that is inhabited —the body and the land—, the community forms of management of that, therefore, acquires in this context an epistemologically worthy and de-hierarchical value, which influences the way of conceiving and self-conceiving as a community. The conquest and subsequent mechanisms of coloniality have imposed in XUAR changes in the ways of management and of relating to the natural environment, turning "particular ecosystems" into "modern forms of nature" (Escobar, 2016). Throughout this study, the term "coloniality" will be understood as a process that has certainly transformed the forms of domination deployed by modernity, but not the structure of the center-periphery relations worldwide (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007: 13). In this particular study case, we are in a scenario where decolonization has not happened; in fact, it is still denied, by the government itself, that there has been a colonization *per se*. Coloniality, therefore, here, is built from the creation of denialist and inclusionist speeches, which nullify the possibility of the subjects' —in broad terms: the land of XUAR and those who inhabit it— very existence. Since, then, the ways of life of the subaltern groups, in all its aspects, are subject to the Modern/Colonial model, it is necessary to re-dignify the community attempts of survival and resistance, as one of the subjects oppressed by the mechanisms of capitalist modernity.

Starting from the framework of decolonial studies, the aim here is to insert this article in the corpus of the latest and most recent researches that work *with* the Uyghur people (Thum, 2014, 2018; Millward, 2018,

2019; Famularo, 2015; Harris & Isa, 2019; Leibold & Grose, 2016; Zenz & Leibold, 2017; etc.), deeply more committed to the people than vertebrates them, and amplified by the emergence of a current increasingly serious humanitarian situation, denouncing the "official" —read, partial— character of the traditional historiographic studies *on* the Uyghur people; The bibliography, then, is reviewed and passed through the lens of the life (hi)stories of Uyghur political exiles, whose looks return an image of conflict that collapses the pacification narratives instilled by the Chinese government.

> *La discrimination se présente comme un ensemble de contraintes diffuses, rarement explicites et brutales, qui amènent les victimes à développer de multiples stratégies, à 'faire avec', c'est-à-dire à 'construire une expérience qui leur permette non seulement de vivre le mieux possible, mais aussi de ne jamais se laisser assigner une identité qui les invalide'* (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013: 31).3

Recent events have favored the contact between the world population and concepts such as terrorism and Islamist fundamentalism, specifically through institutional media information services and episodes of regretful bloodshed and ferocity. However, the dissemination of these notions is part of a programmatic disinformation plan and wide spreading of generalisms, which managed to create a global feeling of Islamophobia. In praxis, this feeling is nothing but a form of cultural racism, "a form of racism that does not even mention the word 'race'" (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006: 4) but based on moral judgments to establish a relationship of domination/downgrade.

The accusations of fundamentalism and terrorism have become weapons for the legitimation of a North-centric program of cohesion, in a scenario of political and epistemological hegemony against a common enemy, represented by the Muslim peoples.

> *If we define fundamentalism as those perspectives that assume their own cosmology and epistemology to be superior and as the only source of truth, inferiorizing and denying equality to other epistemologies and cosmologies, then Eurocentrism is not merely a form of fundamentalism but the hegemonic fundamentalism in the world today* (Grosfoguel, 2010: 31).

Following the last definition, the term "fundamentalism" acquires connotations of political domination, with the intention of setting up a "normal" behavior against another —in this case, the Islamic— considered dangerous and violent. In the case of Uyghur islam, in the PRC "the definition of a 'religious extremist' –and potential terrorist, since 'extremism' is deemed the ideational basis of terrorism– has come to mean anyone participating in any Islamic practice, however peaceful" (Smith Finley, 2019: 11).

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3 "Discrimination is a set of diffuse, rarely explicit and brutal constraints that lead victims to develop multiple strategies, to 'do with', that is, to 'build an experience that not only allows them to live the best possible, but also never to be assigned an identity that invalidates them'". In this article I chose to leave quotes in their original languages, and translate them into English in footnotes when needed.

However, in order to be able to apply the foundations of decolonial theories to our —geographical and research— field we have faced the need to overcome the criticism of Eurocentrism, and analyze the native Chinese forms —imperial and republican— of generating and perpetrating similar mechanisms —that are not inherited. Blaming the contacts between European powers and China for the colonial characteristics of the country's relations with the conquered territories —we could include Tibet and Mongolia, both annexed at the same stage as the XUAR region at the end of the 18th century— would make us reproducers of an ideological, political, strategic and ontological appropriation that does not belong to us. In short, calling the Chinese colonial attitude "Eurocentric" would position us, again, in a hierarchical dichotomy of superiority compared to what has been ours —of the European powers— colonized object, to which we would detract from the ability to be an author of own colonial policies. Eurocentrism itself, then, must be replaced by the most appropriate term —of equal ideological repercussions— of sinocentrism; One of the premises from which this study starts, therefore, is the decentralization of the concept that the term hides, and the denunciation of China's coloniality and Nation-State-centrism *per se*, and not as a byproduct, nor copy, nor inheritance of the Eurocentrated.

The last decades have seen an increase of restrictive measures in many other aspects of the Uyghur culture and identity, such as in the fields of education —like the abolition of bilingual education (UHRP, 2007, 2015b, Schluessel, 2007)—;

> *I've realized being here that* everything *is political, when talking about Xinjiang and China. The Chinese know*

absolutely nothing about the Uyghurs, and they are carrying out cultural destruction programs, making it difficult for new words to be inserted in the language —that is: 5/6 different words are inserted to refer to the same object or concept, to make it much more comfortable for Uyghurs to adopt the Chinese word; Uyghur language education is suspended, etc. I have noticed the weight of politics in all aspects of Uyghur (Interviewee, field notes).

daily life —the restrictions in giving Islamic names to the newborn (RFA, 2017a, 2017b; WUC, 2017) and food customs (RFA, 2015)—, and aesthetics —the prohibition of practices such as the use of veil for women (Leibold & Grose, 2016);

> *After 2009, students could not pray in their dormitories, and the term "Muslim scarf" was coined to indicate the scarf that covers the neck, which began to be banned. Scarves that only covered the head and tied at the back of the neck could be used, but those that covered the women's neck were not allowed. I had never heard this term, and I didn't know what he meant, when my secretary told me that in my classes he was no longer allowed* (Interviewee, field notes).

or beards for men (Lipes, 2014; Hunt et al., 2017).[4]

There are "five types of people" in Xinjiang that cause Chinese authorities a great deal of anxiety: women wearing veils, *jilbab,* or *hijab*; men with long beards; or individuals wearing clothing featuring a star and crescent moon, which appear not only in the East Turkestan independent flag, but also universal symbols of Islam (Famularo, 2015: 5).

In this area, what can be clearly defined as an epistemicide political program, also acquires a marked memoricide character. The programmatic rewriting of the regional history, combined with attempts to eliminate traditional identity markers —language, customs, rites— and religious repression, tend to carry out an "identity cleansing" process and to be replaced by authority-imposed standards.

> *In the Seventies, Eighties… We never had history classes. Of course we had History of China, but in this History they just mentioned some Tibetan people, Uyghur people, just shortly. But they never discussed the whole Uyghur people History of the region. Chinese Central Government in 1980s, 1990s, and still, they did and still are doing a lot of History, official History… Xinjiang History, History of Uyghurs, mostly by some Chinese historian, of course. They have some standards, you know. First of all, Xinjiang since ancient times is part of China. This is*

one. Under this… slogan… we can say historical slogan… you can discuss this historical points. And also… another point is… official point is Uyghur people are a minority. History never had an independent State (Interviewee, field notes).

The communities in exile, in the same way, are in the condition of being diluted in the receiving cultures —"mainstream cultures" (Interviewee, field notes)— and in many cases of not achieving —due to their diasporic and the obvious bureaucratic and diplomatic issues regarding their permanence and settlement in the States that host them— strengthen and spread their culture of origin, especially for the new generations born in exile (Interviewee, field notes). The responsibility lies with the families, who carry identity characteristics —linguistic, religious, daily customs— in the private sphere. However, and naturally, that entails a gradual impoverishment of the culture itself, relegated to the family environment and in general away from intellectual and cultural manifestations. "A language, used like this, within the family, is very limited. It's no longer a language. When your children can read poems in Uyghur, when they can read literature, that means they know the language. Otherwise, they only communicate" (Interviewee, field notes).

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[4] Article 38 of the 2015 XUAR Religious Affairs Regulation prohibits individuals from using their "appearance [i.e. grooming], clothing and personal adornment, symbols, and other markings to whip up religious fanaticism, disseminate religious extremist ideologies, or coerce or force others to wear extremist clothing, religious extremist symbols, or other markings." Article 60 subsequently stipulates that transgressors may face administrative or even criminal punishment, including fines ranging from 3,000 RMB (approx. $485 USD) to 5,000 RMB (approx. $800 USD). The regulations do not specify what constitutes "extremist" attire.

2. Terrorist, Islam -ist/-ic/-ologist, separatist, and more crimes

> *Before it was "separatist". Now, you know, it's terrorist. They're always changing criminal names for Uyghurs. It is fashion right know in the whole world, so, you know, it's easy [...] for Uyghur people to connect to some criminal activity like terrorism* (Interviewee, field notes).

The rise of the "*-isms*"[5] in today's communication language is becoming an increasingly widespread and alarming phenomenon. The reflection of this research comes from a series of sensations generated by the depersonalization of guilt: a consequence of the very concepts that these "*–isms*" express. This will help the reader to get informed through the conventional and institutional channels, to perceive a really disturbing terminological indistinctness, and understand which terms alternates without critical spirit the denominations that title this section, thus making history of the concepts becomes a therapeutical instrument, as Luz Gómez (2018: cap.1) asserts, in order not just to revert the political and social processes, but to reveal the interests that moved those changes in social conditions and palate some of their effects, blocking the perpetration of the manipulation. This manipulation, as quoted below, creates a fertile field to categorizations —and, thus, segregation and repression of what is perceived as "illegal" and "dangerous."

> *La conciencia moderna tiende a otorgar a la distinción entre lo normal y lo patológico el poder de delimitar lo irregular, lo desviado, lo poco razonable, lo ilícito y también lo criminal. Todo lo que se considera extraño recibe, en virtud de esta conciencia, el estatuto de la exclusión cuando se trata de juzgar y de la inclusión cuando se trata de explicar. El conjunto de las dicotomías fundamentales que, en nuestra cultura, distribuyen a ambos lados del límite las conformidades y las desviaciones, encuentra así una justificación y la apariencia de un fundamento* (Foucault, 1992: 7).[6]

Before entering into the reflection proposed for this section, it seems essential to stress that the construction of the "Other" —the repressed being— as a dangerous counterpart by the established political and moral order, legitimizes the authority —i.e. the State— to base their control strategies on hard and coercive measures, in order to not disturb a *pax* that is entirely fictitious. The reality itself, *de facto*, exists as soon as it is based on antagonisms and conflicts. Hence, the entity is

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[5] In fact, the suffix "-ism" was elected Word of the Year in 2015 and its use keeps increasing: https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2015/-ism. Last access: 02.12.2017.

[6] "Modern consciousness tends to give the distinction between the normal and the pathological the power to delimit the irregular, the deviant, the unreasonable, the illicit and also the criminal. Everything that is considered strange receives, by virtue of this consciousness, the status of exclusion when it comes to judging and inclusion when it comes to explaining. The set of fundamental dichotomies that, in our culture, distribute conformities and deviations on both sides of the limit, thus finds a justification and the appearance of a foundation."

in relation to the struggle it establishes with the "Other": the recognition —or ignorance— of another identity.

> *Nell'attività politica ha grandissima parte la fantasia; ma nell'attività politica l'ipotesi non è di fatti inerti, di materia sorda alla vita; la fantasia in politica ha per elementi gli uomini, la società degli uomini [...] Se l'uomo politico sbaglia nella sua ipotesi, è la vita degli uomini che corre pericolo, è la fame, è la rivolta, è la rivoluzione per non morire di fame. Nella vita politica l'attività fantastica deve essere illuminata da una forza morale: la simpatia umana* (Gramsci, 2011: 6-7).[7]

When the comprehension of the "Other" —the "human sympathy" as quoted above in Gramsci's words— lacks, the construction of a "*-ism*" is therefore shaped as the definition of an idea, an ideological collective, or an indistinct group, apparently accompanied by very well established characteristics and applied to all the entities that comprise it: "Uyghurs are Uyghurs more than they are Muslims" (Interviewee, field notes). In the case of religious beliefs, and in spite of not possessing, semantically –either positive or negative connotations-, we do find important differences, depending on the "*-ism*" which we are referring to. The term Buddhism does not raise concerns in public opinion, and yet Islamism —not to mention terrorism— is perceived as one of the most important threats of our times.

The most obvious problematic consequence is the creation of intangible entities: superior monsters, which citizens cannot face as individuals. The only viable solution to this battle is to resort to "powerful" bodies —the State, the government "—, as they are the ones that possess the means to enact contrasting measures: diplomacy or massive repressions and the use of violence. Apparently, we are made to believe that facing those issues is a field that does not correspond to the citizens but to the organs of power, especially because collectivizing evil is a fundamental strategy drafted to perpetuate the belief that being protected by higher organisms is necessary to ensure our safety and our well-being; this fallacy would lead us into the "perennial definition of terrorists as non-state actors, a priori excluding states as agents who can practise terrorism" (Smith Finley, 2019: 14). Indeed, the "*-phobias*" and the "*miso-*s" are daily weapons established in public opinion to take refuge in the care of the powerful, which gradually strengthen their role as indispensable. In the same way, they originate a generalization and categorization —erroneous, in many cases— that associate individuals who share one or many characteristics with an incriminated group and include them in a common cluster. This is how being a Muslim becomes a reason for terrorism suspicion. Belonging to a religion is considered sufficient reason to activate preventive repressive measures and authorizes the application of a series of control protocols. If the global threat cannot be eradicated and the "*-isms*" cannot be practically eliminated, the

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[7] "Imagination plays a very large part in political activity; but in the political activity the hypothesis is not of inert facts, of deaf material to life; the imagination in politics has for men the elements, the society of men [...] If the politician is wrong in his hypothesis, it is the life of men that runs danger, it is hunger, it is revolt, it is the revolution to avoid dying of hunger. In political life the fantastic activity must be illuminated by a moral force: human sympathy."

consequences fall on those who happen to be assimilated with them: "*la consecuencia principal de esta confusión conceptual se podría resumir en que [...] se equiparan los objetivos de la reislamización individual y colectiva con los mecanismos islamistas de organización política*[8]" (Gómez, 2018: cap.1).

It is necessary to highlight the extent to which modern research emphasizes the arbitrary process in which differences are designated and used as tools of ontological and hierarchical categorization. However, religion is a very specific categorization by itself and can only be politically relevant when political actors endorse it. This is the case of China and its racialization/differentiation of the Uyghur people by their religious beliefs.

In the history of the Uyghur people in XUAR, since its definitive forced annexation to the PRC in 1949, and after the years of crude religious repression represented by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), a period of Islamic revival was experienced; in general, this phenomenon can be evidenced in the different mainly Muslim minority nationalities present in the PRC; nevertheless, in the case of the Uyghurs, it represented an attempt to return to previously repressed or prohibited identity practices, but also a strategy of distinction between a people who perceived themselves as conquered and the oppressive power, bearer of anti-clerical and atheists values (Castets, 2003: 17). The attitude of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) towards the identity manifestations —and, among them, the religious ones— of the Uyghur people has remained hard throughout the decades, for fear of separatist projects that could break the national balance: a large number of the newly

built religious spaces, such as Koranic schools and mosques, which had been inaugurated after the end of the GPCR, became object of control by the authorities and, progressively and in an increasingly incipient manner, closed. Land, legends, history(-ies), traditions, religion; all the elements merge in the conformation of the identity of a people that sees its sacred places invaded and violated by the brutality of the modernizing and assimilationist institutional identity-*tabula rasa* projects of the government. The Uyghur traditional collective construction of history (Thum, 2014), together with its staging and legitimization through the foundation of sanctuaries and sacred places connected with it, represented a process of democratization and oralization of history that united indigenous nomadic peoples; these, in the routes marked by the sanctuaries, founded and built a mobile history, and at the same time one that was deeply and intimately linked to their land and their ways of managing it. That history, through the dismantling of sanctuaries, is deprived of part of its material representations, relegating in many cases the "access [to] affective experiences of religion, projects of self-fashioning, and the new geographies of knowledge and experience formed as Uyghurs" on a virtual and strictly individual level, connected to the "available scripts circulating in the wider Islamic world and adapted […] to a very local sense of crisis" (Harris & Isa, 2018: 61).

And yet, it is fundamental that in the areas corresponding to this research, as well as in the daily praxis of our lives and experiences, to demystify and deconstruct the intangible and confer it a real identity. That is, to personify the crimes and those who commit them, so that the

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[8] "The principal consequence of this conceptual confusion might be summarized by saying that […] the aims of both personal and collective reislamization are put on the same level as the Islamist mechanisms of political organization."

power falls in the hands of unique individuals and in the possibility of implementing it. Concentrating efforts to uproot criminal actions and violent behavior empowers the community itself, decreasing the level of need for interventions "from above", in which the masses have no decision role. It is necessary to atomize the constructed entities and give each of them its singularities by eliminating the feeling of collective "guilt" of a group —in addition to a Jewish-Christian-centric matrix— and dismantling the same watertight idea of "group" as carrier of collective values —and crimes. As citizens and individuals, these are some of the measures that we must consider in order to terminate dangerous stereotypes and free the community of responsibility for the actions of unique members of it.

In Social Sciences, we have the duty to refocus our attention on people by increasing academic interest in "*-isms*". On the other hand, we must endeavor to recognize the political/politicized role and the implementation of these "creations" by the power –"much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 40)—, to denounce the tools of media control and consciousness that these names imply, and to reveal the lack of scientific and social value of the categorizations and groups.

3. Intimate Terrorism: Life in the Borderlands[9]

In spite of the constitutional guarantees of linguistic freedom for minority nationalities, the Chinese Government has imposed the institutionalization of the Chinese language not only in education but also in employment, forcing the Uyghurs to place themselves in the Chinese middle class, in order to be competitive and able to survive both in the labor market and in the urban environment (Smith Finley, 2013: 226). However, this strategy can —and should— be read as part of a political program that we might be called as "internal colonialism" in the country, since it has been accompanied not only by the massive extraction of natural resources but also by what can be defined as a metabolic extraction of human resources. As a result of the imposition of the Chinese-State culture —language, cultural heritage, and official history— on the Uyghurs, the result of these policies is the epistemicide of the Uyghur culture (Santos, 2010a, Smith Finley, 2013).

Today, the XUAR region has around of 23,000 mosques and Islam remains as one of the pillars of the social, economic, and private life of the Uyghur people (Smith Finley, 2013: 101). Laws and food restrictions, imposed by the Koran, are largely observed within the Uyghur communities, becoming an important part of their identity patterns and claims. On the other hand, the government policy involves restrictive measures on religious freedom and practices that have impacted the Uyghur identity, helping to fuel an Islamic resurgence in the region.

> *This government is becoming really stupid. The Uyghurs were not so religious. Yes, there were more religious people, but even being religious they was not extremists. I don't know, in the last five years at least, there are people who are starting to do crazy things, like trying to leave China to participate in ... activities, in other parts of the world ... few, not many ... but when someone wants to take something away*

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9 This article borrowed the latter subtitle from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987: 42).

from you, that becomes very valuable (Interviewee, field notes).

The reactivation of Islamic practices — favoured by the end of the GCR period— is considered, by experts such as Jo Smith Finley (2013), as reactive phenomenon, which draws in the historical and cultural roots of the Uyghur people, and imposes itself as a distinctive Islamic element of their identity *vis-à-vis* the imposition of a programmatic identity "*hanization*" and cultural coloniality.

One response within the Uyghur community itself has been the creation of stereotyped images of the Han to make a distinction between "non-Muslim population" and those who follow Islamic rules. The Han have been identified as "*Ḥarām* animals" —a great insult to the Uyghurs— due to their "dirty" diet, due to its different hygiene standards; and "poorly educated", due to their habit of emitting flatulence, spitting, or blowing the contents of their nose on the floor in public spaces (Smith Finley, 2013: 101-107).

However, as mentioned before, the establishment of a narrative by the Chinese Government about the "Muslims" and the emphasis on their religious nature of the *de facto* political and economic claims of the Uyghur people create an "Islamic problem" *per se*. Since 2008, some of the violent events that have taken place in the XUAR were directed against civilians and their alleged religious motivations, and might have common roots with jihadist terrorism (Millward, 2019: 28). Even so, the belonging of small clusters of the population to violent groups does not legitimize the repressive measures against a whole population with more than 20 million individuals.

Meanwhile, the restrictive policy on religious and cultural freedom generates the radicalization of the population. A practical example of these policies is observed in the current religious repression that the State currently applies —in most cases violently— over the Uyghur minorities. The latter relates to the holiday of *Ramaḍān*,[10] which represents one of the most important festivities in the Islamic World.

From a religious perspective, before 2009 in Beijing there was a climate of freedom. Even Saudi Arabia or Malaysia financed the University cafeteria to prepare Ramaḍān food in the evenings and early mornings (Interviewee, field notes).

For some years, the Uyghur communities have complained of an increasingly repressive attitude of the State towards it. The government itself is forbids Muslim officials, students, and citizens of XUAR to respect the fasting period. This is done through official communications —effectively, prohibitions— or public actions that impede the normal development of religious activities, like the closure of food establishments during night hours when the *Ramaḍān* fast is suspended (Florcruz, 2015: 4-5). In addition, other restrictive measures over religious manifestations include the fact that "authorities frequently require religious groups to submit texts for examination before they may be used for worship, [as well as] regional regulations

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[10] With roots in the Koran itself, Fasting (sawm) during the ninth month of the (lunar) year represents the fourth of the Five Pillars of Islam (Arkān al-Islām). Anyone who denies her or his obligation would be considered a miscreant (kāfir). In some countries with an Islamic majority, breaking the fast in public is sanctioned personally as it hurts the common moral.

forbidding mosque attendance for those under 18 years old" (RFA, 2010).

In its staging transformation towards a fully-hanized society, the CCP requires a demonization of religion. The political factors that constitute the basis for independence riots and movements —both in XUAR and, for example, in Tibet— are ignored, while special emphasis is placed on State communications and official media. The Government portrays religion as an anti-pan-Chinese element and a disruptive force in the ideal of national harmony. An online audio recording released on October 2017 by the Xinjiang Communist Youth League, ostensibly with the intention of reassuring the Uyghurs, fully embraced this medical metaphor:

> *If we do not eradicate religious extremism at its roots, the violent terrorist incidents will grow and spread all over like an incurable malignant tumor. Although a certain number of people who have been indoctrinated with extremist ideology have not committed any crimes, they are already infected by the disease. There is always a risk that the illness will manifest itself at any moment, which would cause serious harm to the public. That is why they must be admitted to a re-education hospital in time to treat and cleanse the virus from their brain and restore their normal mind. We must be clear that going into a re-education hospital for treatment is not a way of forcibly arresting people and locking them up for punishment, it is an act that is part of a comprehensive rescue mission to save them* (Millward, 2019: 22-23).

The Uyghur community sees these measures as a provocation, which only result in an increase in the tensions that exist between the majority and the Muslim nationality. In turn, this produces a greater sense of separation from the Uyghurs and a strengthening of their Muslim identity.

In China, the Muslim people have become part of the landscape of the XUAR region, mostly because of their folkloric costumes, mosques, and traditional music. It is not difficult to find their typical businesses or places of worship within both cities and rural areas. They are also part of the social changes that this century endured, especially because of the Chinese economic development and the related exploitation of the natural and human resources imposed in the territory, stimulating the passage from a purely rural native culture to an increasing gentrification. The latter has motivated the hybridization and submission of the original regional culture through policies of sub-alternation and prohibition of the original pillars of the Uyghur culture and other minority nationalities that inhabit the area. Moreover, it also includes problems of transculturization and illegalization of original cosmovisions and epistemes.

In this particular case, the past actions have allowed a series of identity and ethnic repressions, which in many cases forced the political exile of important sectors of the population –denying the possibility of living in the land they claim- and allowed a modern colonialism plan by the State –promoting the controlled migrations of large Han groups towards the region-. The official aim of these measures is to modernize and develop a large "backward" region at a technological and economic level (Becquelin, 2004). An indicative of the feeling towards this invasion

includes a song by Ömarjän Alim titled *Mehman Bashlidim*,[11] which was censored by the authorities at the beginning of the 1990s.

> *I brought a guest back to my home*
> *And at the back, lay down a cushion*
> *Now I cannot enter*
> *The house I built with my own hands*
> *By making him a guest revered*
> *I was separated from this home*
> *Receiving no seat in the orchards*
> *I laid my cushions in the desert*
> *I turned the deserts into oases*
> *And still more guests, they filled that place*
> *Then lopped off the entire branch*
> *And took the fruits away*
> *I brought a guest back to my home*
> *And at the back, lay down a cushion*
> *He jumped into the seat of honour*
> *And boss became to us*
> *And boss became to us*

4. Thoughts from (de)coloniality

Then, why is it so necessary to decolonize the history of Uyghur Islam? Following Sirin Adlbi Sibai's (2016) work, one of the most important elements that mus be deconstructed are the very discourses *on* Islam within the heterarchy of power:

> *[...] la construcción de una consciencia islámica renovada e innovadora [...] debe pasar necesariamente por la consciencia, análisis y resistencia emancipatoria de nuestra deconstrucción y construcción por parte del imperio de la anulación del Otro en el No ser [...] Abordo la descolonización de los discursos sobre [...] islam, a través de evidenciar, analizar y superar el limitante sistémico estructural que define y crea, de hecho, la cuestión a la vez que él mismo es producido por ella, dentro de un esquema heterárquico del poder* (Adlbi Sibai, 2016: 19-20). [12]

Starting from the colonial nature of the relationship established between the PRC and XUAR,[13] and the hybrid nature of the Uyghur Muslim community within the image that the *Umma* itself provides, we are facing two different areas of decolonization. In the first

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[11] Using Joanne N. Smith Finley's translation: "I Brought Home a Guest" (2013: 193).

[12] "The construction of a renewed and innovative Islamic consciousness [...] must necessarily pass through the consciousness, analysis and emancipatory resistance of our deconstruction and construction by the empire of the annulment of the Other in Not Being [...] I approach the decolonization of discourses about [...] Islam, through evidencing, analyzing and overcoming the structural systemic limitation that defines and creates, in fact, the issue at the same time that he himself is produced by it, within a heterarchical scheme of power".

[13] It is impossible to address here the debate about this issue, which has been demonstrated in the work of most contemporary authors who research the Uyghur issue. About this: Schluessel, E. T. (2016). The Muslim Emperor of China: Everyday Politics in Colonial Xinjiang, 1877-1933. Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachussets. Retrieved from http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33493602; Jacobs, J. M. (2016). Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State. Seattle/London: University of Washington Press; Leibold, J. (2007). Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenes Became Chinese. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; and Sautman, B. (2000). Is Xinjiang an Internal Colony? Inner Asia, 2(2), 239-271.

place, we need to denounce the political implications of the Chinese Nation-State Islamophobia and the consequent accusations of terrorism harassing the social movements of the Uyghur people. Precisely, autonomy and independence demands are the engine of an organized State repression that hides under a more dignified —in the eyes of the international community- mask of anti-terrorism struggle. "China's use of the war on terror was intended to halt international criticism of its repressive policies towards Uyghur people but later it turned out to be a full-scale domestic campaign against terrorism" (Kanat, 2012: 510). Once again, as affirmed by Amin Maalouf, religion does not cease to be a mere "agglutinant of ethnic groups at war" (Maalouf, 2009: 105).

On the other hand, it is necessary to free Uyghur Islam[14] from its inclusion (dictated by colonial political and epistemological geography) in the Arab-Islamic world — conventionally known as MENA[15]— by acknowledging the existence of aspects unique to the Uyghur ontological identity and dignity:

> *The people of the Tarim Basin, the ancestors of modern Uighurs, along with Turkic tribes of the steppes and mountains (including the Kazakhs' and Kyrgyz' forebears), converted to Islam in several waves beginning around the year 1000. Central Asian Islam is quite different from that of the Middle East, however, and especially from that promoted in modern times by Wahhabi and Salafi groups sponsored by the House of Saud. Uighur prayer can involve chanting and dancing, and music is not forbidden* (Millward, 2019: 12).

The diaspora character (Sayyid, 2010; Mandaville, 2001) of the universal Muslim community —the *Umma*— goes back to the establishment of the first *Umma* in 622 AD, year of the *hijra* (Olivieri, 2019). The *Umma* has undergone processes of geographical, ethnic, and epistemological expansion and diversification, heterogeneous with currents and ruptures —*fitan*, sing, *fitna*— that have pluralized and localized practices of Islam *per se*, in spite of maintaining this as a supraterritorial normative code and universally valid for every Muslim.

The European colonialism and the repercussions it brought to the entire Islamic world —from Morocco to Asia-Pacific- represents the key moment in which the *Umma* became the symbol of anti-colonial resistance.

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[14] It is also necessary to differentiate the people traditionally denominated "Muslim Chinese": the Hui minority nationality. The Hui were officially recognized as a minority nationality since the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949. Since then, the Chinese and the Chinese-speaking population of Islamic faith have been included under this denomination, adopting the national language and the dialect of the region in which they are based. Because of this greater proximity of the Hui to the majority Han culture, it is not unusual to refer to them with the simple name of "Muslim Chinese". Nonetheless, it is essential for this purpose to clarify this concept. As Gladney (1996: 20) expresses: "Though the Hui are often referred to as the Chinese Muslims, because they generally speak Chinese and are more culturally similar to the Han than, say, the Turkish-speaking Muslims, this term is inappropriate and misleading since, by law, all Muslims in China are citizens of the Chinese State and thus Chinese".

[15] Middle East and North Africa.

Said so, the liberating counterhegemonic element of the oppressive external yoke and the need to fight against a common enemy entails a deeper reflection on the Muslim intellectual scene on a global scale. The latter renews the willingness to build the *Umma* as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist defense through a pragmatic political and religious program, which advocates to the union of all Muslim people in a unitary State institution. The consequences of colonial domination, still visible after the attainment of independence, and the imposition of the socio-centric model as a derivation of imperialism, have favored the establishment of hierarchizing and homogenizing praxis within the *Umma* itself. All of which have become explicit in the imposition of patterns of "purity" and "authenticity" in the different Muslim landscapes, and have led to discriminatory and violent practices against critical groups. This exclusion of groups considered inferior by the powerful violates one of the basic foundations of the *Umma* has been attributed by some sources to the first caliphs and the same Prophet, whereby the differences within the community are a bless/*ikhtilāf al-umma raḥma* are propitiating the creation of the dominant narrative about Islam as a unique and absolute system.

Migration represents the very basis of the *Umma*, which has been built extraterritorially from the *hijra*. In times of diaspora and migrations, its supranational dimension becomes a primordial element, mainly because it emphasizes in the locality of its essence and its intrinsic hybridity: the influences of socio-cultural contexts in which the different practices are based on and from the daily life of the Muslim people. Undeniably, this increases the need of the people to mobilize as an *Umma*, recognizing themselves as an alternative political order, not only faced with

an external "Other" —the colonial powers— but also within the same homogenizing drifts used by the power groups to persecute those who are considered subversives of their vision.

If we change the latitude of these assumptions and apply the same colonial categories to the heterarchization that the Chinese Nation-State imposes on part of its population, we can include a scenario that reflects what was analyzed here. In the XUAR, the colonial relations are constructed as a programmatic tool to perpetrate plans of appropriation of land, natural resources, geostrategic position, and power at the expense of the indigenous populations' management forms. Folklorization —that is, capitalization and monetarization— and elimination of the identity of the original people are the tools used by the State to effectively apply its plundering policies.

The repressive measures, justified under a facade of "secularization", are accompanied by homogenizing projects of the Uyghur religious culture. On January 2019, the Chinese Government and the China Islamic Association announced the implementation of a five-year plan to "sanitize" the Islamic practices and institutions of the country, with the aim of promoting the "core values of socialism, traditional culture, laws and regulations" (RFA, 2019: 3) and drafting an "Islam Made in China" (RFA, 2019: 28). These measures raise concerns of a possible "religion war" and further "attacks on culture, society, traditions, and lifestyle", similar to the case of the Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini (Li, 2019: 3), who promotes fear, rejection, and a feeling of danger towards "the others." Leaving aside the worrying irony that arises from the CCP's use of the xenophobic discourses, these are presented as a confrontation *in excursus* against the epistemic diversity represented by Uyghur traditional

religious culture —and Muslim— in general. The objectives pursued theoretically by the Chinese Government are summarized in the safeguarding of a "world of great harmony," as President Xi Jinping has affirmed on numerous public occasions. However, according to *The Global Times*, a sister newspaper with the official spokesman of the CCP, the People's Daily (RFA, 2019: 26): "Although there are people on Twitter who maliciously accuse China of totalitarianism and being a colonial power, they still have to admit that [...] in Xinjiang, religious extremism has been effectively addressed, [and] peace and order have been restored in the region" (Li, 2019: 6).

The "peace" that the Government boasts of having achieved in the region is not at all perceived by its population and it was allegedly obtained thanks to the State's war against the "three evil forces:" ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism. Nonetheless, the measures implemented to maintain that supposed "restored" order —occupation of the territory, prohibitions of cultural, identity, and religious practices, consequent epistemicide, establishment of a surveillance State (Millward, 2018);

> *It exists as a kind of... It is not exactly a list of wanted people... Families are classified depending on their political past, their educational level or their level of religious knowledge. My family was classified as "key family." That*

means you can't do anything, you can't go anywhere. That is, you cannot ask for a passport. I'm here. I am considered a political activist, but I am not, I am a normal worker, I just try to tell the truth. My brother has been jailed twice for it, and my father is a very respectable figure in the town. But for that reason, we have been classified as "key family" (Interviewee, field notes).

or, more recently, mass arrests and disappearances of nearly one million Uyghurs (Zenz & Leibold, 2017; Thum, 2018) and the establishment of 1200 reeducation camps (Millward, 2019)— made possible to include the PRC into the current Modern/Capitalist/Colonial World System. Violence is imposed as the official way of maintaining order, in a State that proclaims itself harmonious in its diversity, while lacking the "ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity" (Lederbach, 2005: 5).

5. Final considerations. Islam as a decolonial resistance

Since 2017, news[16] about the opening of supposed political fields in remote areas of XUAR are being disseminated. In those camps, thousands of Uyghur people are being deported —according to the official communicates- in order to attend "vocational education and

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[16] "Thanks to remarkable reporting by Gerry Shih (now at The Washington Post) for the Associated Press and Josh Chin, Clément Bürge, and Giulia Marchi for The Wall Street Journal, as well as important early stories from other researchers and correspondents, including Maya Wang (Human Rights Watch), Rob Schmitz (NPR), and Megha Rajagopalan (BuzzFeed News). Especially important is the Washington, D.C. –based Radio Free Asia Uighur service, which has for years provided detailed, accurate coverage despite notorious controls on information in Xinjiang" (Millward, 2019: 2).

employment training centers" (Millward, 2019: 3) and alienate subjects potentially involved in "extremist" activities, while promoting "other 'measures' to counter 'extremism'" (Millward, 2019: 3). The State's concerns stem from the supposed conviction that the world-recognized terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qa'eda and the IS, have expressed their intention to include the Uyghur people and their territory in a wider Islamist project on a global scale, with some even declaring their plan to annex XUAR to the Islamic Caliphate (Florcruz, 2014; Famularo, 2015). Nevertheless, anti-terrorism measures are part of a broader political plan for regional control and the suppression of movements of ethnic and national independence promoted by the indigenous XUAR population do not take into account that "such calls for the strict Islamization of Xinjiang society are anathema to Uyghurs and other local minorities, who are moderate, syncretic Muslims" (Famularo, 2015: 1).

In recent decades, the forced cohabitation —although segregated, in most cases— of the Uyghur people with the Han majority has increased multiple hybrid identities and new ways of local recognition, as well as an Islamic renewal and return to deeper character roots linked to religion;

> *In Beijing we lived an Uyghur life with other Uyghurs, in an Uyghur neighborhood: we barely had relations with Chinese, you know, normal stuff, good morning and goodbye. We did not feel much pressure because the Chinese did not identify us as Uyghurs, they considered us foreigners, they made comments like "how well do you speak Chinese", "where have you learned to speak like that", etc. At the beginning, before 2009, we did not perceive great repressions: we could make our voice*

> *heard, speak freely with the police, even respond to them badly. I really think I could do it because they didn't identify me as a Uyghur. After 2009, the attitude of the people begins to change when they discover that we are Uyghurs: we could not protest in front of the authority, we could not obtain car license plates, etc. [...] When our son was born, we sent him to live with his grandparents in Ürümqi: we had no plans to stay in Beijing forever, and besides that, there he would not have been able to grow as a "Uyghur man"; He should have gone to a Chinese nursery, he would not have learned the language and culture of his people. It was a difficult choice, but we thought it would be the best for him* (Interviewee, field notes).

despite the fact that the State continues perpetrating violent narratives and disseminating distorted images of the Uyghur people's religious belonging, Islam has become a form of local re-existence and opposition to the epistemicidal and subalternizing policies of the Chinese Nation-State: a response to the failed developmentalist and modernizing measures imposed by the government, which breaks the traditional community dynamics of resources and knowledge management, imposing hierarchical laws, and asymmetric ethnic/ontological separations. It is imposed as an element of national unity, in opposition to the defeat that nationalistic aspirations have suffered *vis-à-vis* with the Chinese State (Smith Finley, 2013: 236).

The stories related by the academics committed to the Uyghur cause and those who had the opportunity to extensively study the XUAR region give us a measure of how the situation of the local people has suffered

enormous and visible changes in recent years. Although the inter-ethnic situation shows tense hues —though not continuously-, the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium were characterized by a manifest rebirth of religiosity in more visible facets. After the dark years of religious repression, represented by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the greatest powers of the Middle East, a deeper cultural exchange have also manifested in the reopening of worship places and the growth of important links between the Islamic Association of China and —among others— Saudi Arabia. Also, the attire of the generations grown in the 1990s and the first years of the 2000s was modified, making more visible the signs of religious identity between the population, as well as of popular participation in symbolic events and places: mosques, Koranic schools, sanctuaries, etc. (Smith Finley, 2013).

Nonetheless, the toughening of anti-religious policies by the Chinese Government has reversed the latter trends, forcing an increasingly large swath of the population to publicly renounce to parts of their identity, and abandon customs and typical dresses of their religiosity (Famularo, 2014; Florcruz, 2015; Hunt et al., 20176; Leibold & Grose, 2016; Li, 2019; Lipes, 2014; Millward, 2018, 2019; RFA, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2019; UHRP, 2007, 2015), under the threat of being considered enemies of the State and liable of being repressed and punished. As the processes of hanization are imposed in public education and standardized under State precepts, other programs imposed by the government instill narratives and homogenizing speeches with a marked anti-Islamic character.

These prohibitions harm the population's possibility to express their belonging and prevent Islam from representing an intimately constitutive character of the Uyghur identity, always relegated to the exquisitely personal and private sphere. The process of pacification of the region, as the State proposes, goes through the violent repression of anyone who interrupts the imposed restrictive norms. On the contrary, it nurtures the creation of a conflict that ends up being internalized by the populations —both the Uyghurs and the Hans — as "normal", perpetrating a form of popular segregation and racial/Islamophobic stereotypes. Indeed, Islam becomes an intimate and personal form of resistance against the oppression of the powerful, becoming an identity space, individual and national, in which collective feelings manage to overcome ontological separations and contest against epistemicide measures. This collective welfare does not cease to represent the interests of a group —a majority, at a population level- and the chosen path to eliminate all distinctive features, fostering the creation —in real "laboratories", the reeducation fields- of a homogenous and unidirected society, standardized by the State.

Derived from this article, if the focus of attention and interest lies on the conflicts generated as a result of hegemonic policies applied to those areas established as subordinates, as well as in the social protest that derives from appropriation forms — colonial-territorial, identity, epistemic, and ontological—, we cannot stay away from launching a look at counter-hegemonic discourses that question the forms of relationships established within power, knowledge, and the ecosystem. Precisely, in its way of approaching this field, a central character —that in the Uyghur claims acquires dyes of re-existence- enriches the resistance. Though it is true that it has been tried through a theoretical foundation, always discovering and exposing some hegemonic tools, the forms of

indigenous struggle —a form of re-existence inside and outside the PRC— have a role that this research wants to prioritize.

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