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Factors That Shape Mosque Archives

A Multi-level Model

Stephanie Müssig | ORCID: 0000-0002-2199-2972

Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg; Erlangen Centre

for Islam and Law in Europe EZIRE, Erlangen, Germany

stephanie.muessig@fau.de

Abstract

In most mosque archives, the subject range seems to be limited to bureaucratic matters. In this article I discuss the factors that are responsible for this constraint. Using academic literature on (Christian) religious and (ethnic) community archives, as well as relying on the research presented in this special issue, I develop a hierarchical (or multi-level) model of subject ranges in mosque archives by considering factors at the individual, intermediate, and system level. I argue that the individual dispositions of mosque leaders regarding resources and attitudes, as well as funds at the intermediate level, are key to the maturing of the archiving culture in mosques.

Keywords

archives – mosque – resources – subject range

1 Introduction

Mosque archives can vary greatly. They can vary in subject range, timeframe, arrangement, completeness, materiality, and the condition of the material. I will focus on the subject range of mosque archives, as it is their most meaningful and most substantial characteristic as regards the archive's function as a community and religious repository. Taking this into account, it is therefore surprising that most mosque archives do not differ much in terms of subject

range, with them largely being limited to bureaucratic matters. In this article, I will look at the factors that are responsible for this constraint.¹

The importance of archives for societies has been emphasised many times. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook (2002: 2) summarise it well: 'Archives – as records – wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies.' Given this pivotal societal function of archives, it should be an archival principle for them to be as inclusive and representative of the entire societal community as possible. In democracies, this principle can be derived from the equal value of each person.

However, societal sub-groups and marginalised communities do not have a fixed place in mainstream archival policies (Caswell *et al.*, 2017: 2). They tend to be ignored, trivialised or misrepresented in public or government-funded archives, or treated 'simply as if [they] did not exist', as Michelle Caswell (2014: 27) observed for the South Asian community in the United States. Similar observations have been made in European countries (e.g. Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, 2009). So-called independent community archives are seen as a remedy for this gap (Flinn, *ibid*; Caswell *et al.*, 2017).

Concurrent with the discovery of community archives and their value to science and society in the 1960s, research highlighted another archival field that has been neglected so far: archives and the repositories of religious institutions. Back then, a broad scholarly discussion started on what (Christian) congregational archives and church repositories should comprise – a debate that is ongoing. An important observation by Chloe Edwards (2012: 50) was that the documentation of organisational life stays at the level of ordinary bureaucracy for most religious institutions. The potential to 'reflect new religious practices, theological tendencies and historiographical trends' (Lambert, 1975: 49) through an adequate appraisal of records on religious life, remained unused for a long time.

What had already been determined for racial communities and Christian institutions in the United States and the UK several decades ago, is still true for mosque communities in Germany today, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate. Considering the societal and religious-theological impact that a thoughtful appraisal of such documents would bring, it is astounding that mosque archives rarely go beyond general record management for administrative purposes.

1 In writing this article, I benefited from valuable comments and suggestions from Gerdien Jonker and two anonymous reviewers.

Why, then, is the subject range of most mosque archives limited to routine administrative records? More specifically, I am asking what factors influence the curation of subjects?

My thoughts on these questions have two points of departure that are also reflected in the sections of this article. First, my suggested scheme of categories and subjects in the next section has three roots. It is informed by the ‘finding aid’ of the archives of the Ahmadiyya mosque in Berlin-Wilmersdorf (Jonker, 2019), the articles in this special issue, and soundings in Turkish mosque archives, that were conducted in 2021 and described in ‘Turkish mosque registries in the industrial towns of southern Germany. An ethnographic inquiry’ by Jonker, Elbel et al. (2022) in this volume.

Second, I develop a theoretical, hierarchical (or multi-level) model of factors that shape the subject range of mosque archives. I consider factors at the individual, intermediate, and system level. To arrive at a multi-level model of archival subject ranges, the most puzzling question has been why mosque archives generally lack records on the social and religious life of the mosque, even though these aspects have the biggest impact regarding history-making, identity construction, and religious authority. To think about this, I used a constraint-based approach. As I will show, it is mainly a lack of resources, attitudes at the individual level, and a shortage of funds at the intermediate level that explains why archival activity among mosques is only in its infancy. The low tangibility of the religious on paper (O’Toole, 1984: 99) further complicates record-keeping when resources are limited. To make it more tangible, archives need to go beyond paper-based records and find means to safeguard orally transmitted accounts and personal storytelling, as well as religious performances.

I will conclude this article by suggesting some thoughts on the steps that need to be taken for the maturing of archival culture in mosque communities, and the contribution of research towards this end.

2 A Scheme of the Categories and Subjects of Mosque Archives

Research on mosque archives is in its infancy, and real-world examples are only just being discovered, so it is difficult to know how to assess what subjects mosque archives could comprise in their most comprehensive form. The most important source of guidance regarding this question has been the finding aid of the archivalia of the Ahmadiyya mosque in Berlin-Wilmersdorf (Jonker, 2019). I took most of the examples in column 3 of Table 1 from this and grouped them together into subjects (column 2). Two other important sources

are the descriptions of records in the articles in this special issue, and the data gathered during the soundings of mosque registries in southern Germany (see Jonker, Elbel et al., in this volume). Although research on mosque archives is a fresh topic, there are in fact two established fields of archival studies that serve as models with which to compare the subject range of mosque archives. One is the broad scholarly discussion on what (Christian) congregational archives and church repositories should comprise. The other is research on (ethnic) community archives. Mosques in Western Europe, being both religious and ethnic organisations, lie at the intersection of these two.

The subjects identified in this way are further grouped into three broader categories (column 1 of Table 1). I have developed them against the backdrop of the data and the situation in Germany, although they are applicable in this, or a slightly adapted, form to mosque archives in other Western European countries too, since each category rests on a distinct criterion: in the first category, the retention of data for legal reasons; in the second, retention for administrative purposes; and in the third, retention for a symbolic reason. This last criterion refers to the suggestion by O'Toole (1984) that religious archives set themselves apart from other archives as they have not only an informative and evidential meaning (Schellenberg, 1956), but also a symbolic one. Symbolic meaning is specific to the archival materials of religious institutions, because, in it, the religious is reflected. An example given by O'Toole (1984: 94) on baptism illustrates these three meanings. The certificate of baptism not only testifies to who has been baptised (informative meaning), and that the baptism has taken place (evidential meaning), but also reveals what the church believes about baptism, i.e. child vs. adult baptism (symbolic meaning). This means that it is only in the third category, concerning the social and religious life of a mosque community, and the symbolic meanings that come with it, that the religious can be properly documented.

The first category in Table 1, 'Legal documentary requirements', contains records that organisations are required to retain by law. In Germany, organisations that have the status of a registered association are subject to these legal obligations. The vast majority of mosques in Germany are registered associations² and so they have obligations to document activities, to report these to the registry office on a regular basis, and to store these documents for a given time period.³ In Germany, this applies to the documentation of the

2 In Germany, 91% of all mosques are registered associations. The remaining mosques are networks or initiatives at the grassroots level, without a particular legal status (Halm et al., 2012: 62).

3 Material that is relevant for tax declaration has to be stored for ten years; all other material needs to be stored for six years.

TABLE 1 Categories, subjects, and example of records in mosque archives

Category	Subjects	Examples of records
Legal documentary requirements	Documentation of founding process	Records of names of founders and founding members; founding minutes; application to the registry office
	Statutes, changes to them	Rules of procedure, regulations on arbitration/fees/honours
	Board matters	Minutes of board elections, certification of the appointment of the board; members meetings: invitations, agendas, minutes; discharge of the board; resignations from board
	Membership matters	Documentation of membership fees, admission fees; documentation of membership: entries/exits
	Taxation matters	Income, property, transfer. In the case of non-profit-status: application to tax office, donation certificates
Records for administrative purposes	Real estate and facility management	Insurance, bills, building and construction documents: correspondence with architects, engineers, construction companies, and municipal authorities, cost estimates, contracts
	Office organisation	Bills of orders on books, office material, and travelling; letterheads, address and name stamps; drafts/versions of club logos; inventory lists
	Management of revenues	Documents on catering on Fridays/weekends; letting rooms (e.g. banqueting hall); documents on fundraising activities; donations
	Human resources management	Diplomas/certificates/cvs of personnel, documents on hiring and firing, time sheets, payrolls
	Conflict management	Documents on lawsuits; letters, minutes on disputes.

TABLE 1 Categories, subjects, and example of records in mosque archives (*cont.*)

Category	Subjects	Examples of records
Records of social and religious life	Matters related to regular services and activities	Organisation of halal meet; organisation of charitable activities, e.g. soup kitchen, distribution of second-hand goods; management of and bookkeeping on regular courses/classes/meetings, e.g. discussion groups, Arabic lessons, children's club, women's circles; boarding school; boarding house
	Matters related to exceptional services and activities	Workshops, training courses: requests for speakers/trainers, invitations, schedules; festivities, jubilees: organisation, documentation, e.g. programmes, invitations/confirmations/cancellations/ participants lists, menus, thank-you notes; excursions, field trips organisation, bills, personal reports
	Self-promotion and review	Reports on goals and successes; in-house publications, the newsletter to members; publications on the mosque, media reporting
	Public relations Networking	Press releases, own publications, speeches Correspondence with umbrella organisation; cooperation with municipality/other organisations; address lists, business cards (own and others); documentation of transnational links
	Religious matters	Recording of sermons and <i>sohbets</i> ; documentation of life events: circumcision, weddings, divorces, funerals; chaplaincy; conversions; missionary work; arbitration/ conflict resolution; interfaith work
	Political involvement	Testimonies of hardship for Muslims here and abroad; records of lobbying activities and attempts to influence political decision-making

founding process, including the names of founders and founding members, the founding minutes, and the application to the registry office. In addition, the statutes and changes to them have to be recorded, as well as matters regarding the board, the membership, and tax. Conflicts need to be recorded too, if they are related to registry status or not-for-profit status, if the mosque has it.

The second category in Table 1, 'Records for administrative purposes', comprises subjects for which data retention is recommended from an administrative and management perspective. To this category belongs content on the management of facilities and real estate, office organisation, management of revenues, human resources management, and conflict management. Although the collection of records in this category is necessary to a certain degree to maintain associational life, the question as to what records, and how many, should be collected is left to administrative leaders and staff.

The last category, 'Records of social and religious life', covers subjects that relate to the social and religious life of the mosque. From the perspective of organisational management, records in this category are superfluous but, in contrast, they are key from a symbolic perspective as they bear witness to social and religious life (for identity construction), historiography and the less tangible aspects of a religious community's life, as well as its religious beliefs (Edwards, 2012: 52). The recording of matters related to regular and exceptional services and activities belongs in this category, as well as self-promotion and review (including all kinds of in-house publications as well as external publications on the mosque), the documentation of public relations and networking endeavours, religious matters, and the documentation of political involvement. These records testify to a mosque's general ideological – or symbolic – positions, such as interfaith work, civil rights struggles or the changing role of women in religious life (Wertheimer, Bernhardt, and Miller, 1994: 378–9; Edwards, 2012: 56).

Not explicitly stated in this table is the material nature of records. However, it is easy to imagine that records in the categories 'Legal documentary requirements' and 'Records for administrative purposes' mainly consist of (formal) paperwork. Records in the category 'Records of social and religious life' may, because of their symbolic character, be more heterogeneous in their materiality. They may consist of not only common records such as bills or certificates, but also personal papers, diaries, internal casual correspondence, and pictorial and audio-visual representations of events, as well as orally recounted memories of community members, and other memorabilia; these are records in their own right in this category. The power of images should not be underestimated for creating a legacy, recounting history, and shaping identity, as the article

by Raida Chbib and Julius Matuschik (2022) in this special issue convincingly demonstrates. The ability of mosque leaders to acknowledge these material records as eligible archival material is one factor among others that affects the subject range of a mosque archive, as I will argue in the next section.

3 Factors That Shape Subject Range

From consideration of the articles in this special issue and the academic literature, I identify three sets of factors that shape the subject range of archives. These sets are in a hierarchical relationship to each other. One set contains the individual-level attributes of the organisational authority, the administrator or the persons in charge of the mosque. The other two sets are on the context level, containing factors of the meso or intermediate level, i.e. the mosque as an organisation, and on the system level to which the mosque is bound. Figure 1 illustrates this structure. The individual factors are plotted at the lowest level; the intermediate factors are at the middle level; and at the top are the system-level factors. To reduce complexity, intra- and inter-level effects that I will address in the text, i.e. effects between factors on the same level and effects between factors at different levels, are not shown in Figure 1.

Two factors at the individual level may explain the subject range of mosque archives: individual resources and attitudes (Figure 1). Resources refer to the organisational abilities of the administrator or person in charge of the mosque,

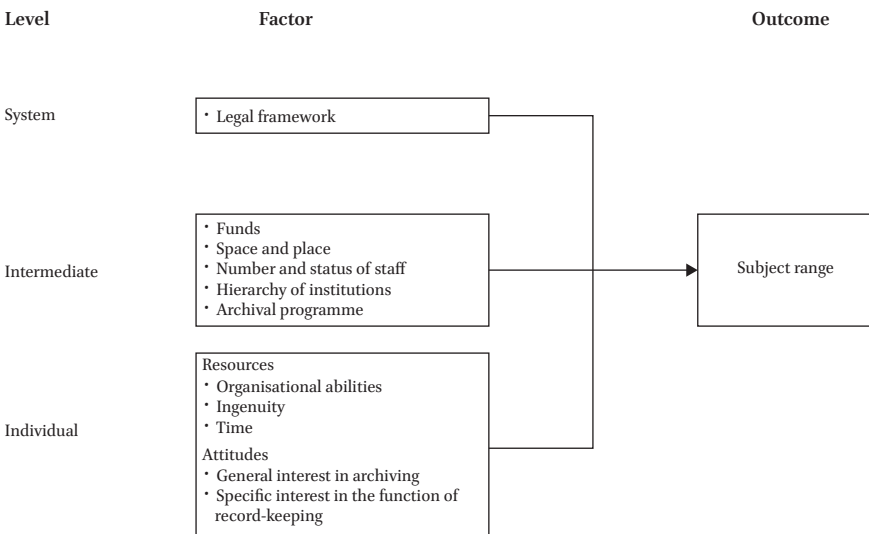


FIGURE 1 Multi-level model of the subject range of mosque archives

their ingenuity, and the amount of time they have. Time is a precondition for systematically collecting and storing records. Organisational abilities make it possible to think about a recording system, be it by topic or by year, and such abilities also facilitate the appraisal of records, i.e. deciding what to keep and what to let go. Both are scarce resources in mosque organisations, since they are mainly led by volunteers, who are ‘untrained or too busy to pay attention’, as Lambert (1975: 50) puts it concerning the archives of Christian institutions, but this is also the case for mosques. Ingenuity enables the archivist to think ahead and beyond documenting the mosque’s formal activity, in order to safeguard Muslim belief and Muslim social contributions. In order to achieve this, the ingenious archivist needs to widen their conception of recording material and go beyond paperwork to include personal papers, orally transmitted data, and things that witness to religious life (Edwards, 2012: 51, 62 with reference to Ling, 1984; Şahin, 2022). The archivist also needs to be open not only to what and in which form to collect data, but also from whom to collect it. To depict the social and religious life of a religious community, material needs to be safeguarded not only from community leaders or functionaries, but also from the ordinary member (the laity), men and women alike (Edwards, 2012: 58). Resources thus refer to the individual capacity to build an archive.

Attitudes refer to the stance one takes towards record keeping and the safeguarding of material. This needs interest and appreciation for a record and its functions for the community. Among these functions are: (a) to share information; (b) to create identity; (c) to protect the interests of community members (a sense of social responsibility; evidential value); (d) to construct a social and historical memory; (e) to exert religious authority (we do it this way, not the other [symbolic value]); (f) to validate the mission; (g) to justify the organisation as a necessary institution for society; and (h) to create a legacy (Cox, 1989; Edwards, 2012: 52–3; Kaye et al., 2006: 276–280; Johnson, 2008: 191). A lack of the above most likely results in a lack of identifying and preserving records, as Cox (1989: 68–69) concluded for evangelical Christian institutions in the USA in the 1980s. More generally, the function an archivist has in mind determines the record he is willing to keep (Cook, 1996: 140). Attitudes thus address a person’s motivation (concerning how) to deal with records.

As Mahmoud Jaraba (2022) describes in his article in this special issue, the lack among imams of both organisational training and a sense of the archive’s social and theological function are responsible for the poor record-keeping on *nikah* in the Arab mosques in Germany he visited. From another angle, Gerdien Jonker’s (2022) study of the Ahmadiyya mosque, too, suggests that individual capabilities and a taste for preservation are in fact important ingredients for a prospering mosque archive. That being said, the contribution of Jonker,

Elbel et al. (2022) and the manuscript of Şahin (2022) make clear that there is a strong awareness among Muslim community leaders of their heritage. The problem is only that they have not yet found a way to transfer their archives from the heads of their elder members – in the form of non-material, oral transmission and personal story-telling – to a generally accessible record. The potential for regular administrative records to become a source of community heritage has also been largely overlooked.

The context-level factors can be divided into two categories: intermediate-level factors and system-level factors (Figure 1). Intermediate-level factors concern the mosque association itself. Starting with the work of August Suelflow (1969) on maximum and minimum standards for religious archives, most subsequent academic work has focused on these factors to explain differences in religious archiving (Bellamy, 1976: 133–4; Menne-Haritz, 1994; Featherstone, 2006; McFarland, 2012; Zavala et al., 2017). Telling from these studies, the funds available for an archive, the space and place allocated for it, the number of staff, the hierarchy of institutions, and existing and stable archival programmes, all explain, at the intermediate level, the subject range of mosque archives.

Funding is a precondition for having a wide-ranging archive, since it determines the number of staff, the space and place available, and the possibility of producing stable archival programmes. It is to be expected that paid administrators ensure a greater diligence and precision in safeguarding material than volunteers, because they can invest more time in it. Furthermore, it can be assumed that mosque archives benefit from continuity of administrative management: a paid administration is less volatile than a voluntary one that changes every few years with new board elections (Cox, 1989: 68–9); the more stable it is, the more complete and more systematic the record material is likely to be. Funding also determines the number of staff: the more people investing their time in handling material, preserving it or describing what cannot be kept, the more professional an archive can be in its scope. Equally, funding makes it possible to put in place an archival programme or policy that is valid and stable over time. It determines what content is collected and classified in the archive to make it accessible to future users.

For most mosque communities, funding, and the constraints that come with it, is a major factor in their archival subject range; the constraints on staff and space seem especially decisive here. As the soundings of mosque archives described by Jonker, Elbel et al. in this special issue reveal, all but one mosque are led by a committee of volunteers. In those mosques, only the imam holds a paid position, but he is replaced by another every four years. This administrative structure is a major constraint for building up a stable archival programme.

Closely connected is the hierarchy of institutions as an intermediate factor, although this has an ambivalent role in terms of the subject range. If the mosque belongs to an umbrella organisation, it may be that the safeguarding of material and record keeping is standardised, and thus extraordinarily systematic and diligent. However, the standardised guidelines may lead to a focus that is too centred on formal areas of community life and overlooks informal aspects. The latter have been identified as reflecting the 'less tangible aspects' (Edwards, 2012: 59) of a religious community's life and capture these religious features much better than formal areas do. Thus, the institutional hierarchy of a mosque can facilitate record-keeping because it relieves the individuals in charge of the demanding task of developing their own archival structure. At the same time, however, it may narrow the subject range because it leaves little room or incentive to go beyond these documenting policies. Which of these takes effect depends on how the umbrella organisation administers its members – like a corporation, a cooperative, a social movement or an extended family (McFarland, 2012: 108). It also depends on the outcome of the interplay of this intermediate-level factor with individual-level factors: the degree of ingenuity at the individual level can moderate the paternalistic influence of the umbrella organisation at the intermediate level.

Although most of the Turkish mosques in Germany belong to an umbrella organisation, directives or policies on record-keeping seem to be an exception, taking the experiences of Jonker, Elbel et al. (2022) in this special issue into account.

Clearly, spacious facilities allow for the storage of more and a greater variety of material than tiny premises. Space that lags behind the quantity of records available leads to strict appraisal policies, as Menne-Haritz (1994: 529) notes with regard to archival practices in Germany between the two World Wars. Moreover, the amount of space available determines whether the material is stored in one place in the building or is scattered over several rooms, or is even stored in the private homes of mosque leaders. And it is not only the space itself, but also its condition that is critical. Damp basements and poorly insulated attics encourage the decay of records. Another important attribute here is whether the mosque building has ever suffered damage, e.g. caused by water or fire. Both might cause severe losses of records, or might at least affect their condition.

Next, the site of a mosque is crucial, because its location, and especially easy connection to public transport and to the city centre, can attract visitors, as do the number and type of social facilities it has, that is the size of the male and female prayer rooms, and whether it has a banquet hall, restaurant or café, teaching facilities, youth facilities, etc. Research in accounting shows

that social group size is positively related to record-keeping (Basu, Kirk, and Waymire, 2009: 903–6). Applying this evidence to record-keeping in mosques, it is to be expected that the more a mosque has to offer, the more people visit it, and the greater the administrative effort and paperwork that brings with it, as well as the amount of material worth archiving.

It is not only the attractiveness of the place that is crucial for the archival subject range, but also its continuity. The continuity of a mosque in one place is important, too, since mosques that move house have a greater risk of leaving behind old storage and filing principles, there is a greater risk that material will be thrown out, and that material will be stored in private homes that become difficult to access, with the result that the archive's contents may easily fall into oblivion. Lastly, besides the relative permanence of a mosque in one single place, the absolute age of a mosque is also decisive for the subject range of its archive: mosques with a long history have simply had more time and opportunities to collect material than those that are recently founded.

Most Turkish mosque communities in Germany are around 40 years old, and thus have a legacy to share, but they have also generally moved house several times in search of more space or more representative facilities. Jonker, Elbel et al. (2022) identify this discontinuity of place as a major constraint on the subject range of mosque archives.

The context factor at the system level is the legal framework (Figure 1). As I explained above, it determines the minimal subject range of a mosque archive. However, legal obligations do not mean that safeguarding records becomes an automatic process. As Jonker (2022) and Jaraba (2022), both in this special issue, impressively demonstrate, a modicum of awareness and understanding of state administrative structures is needed in order for the legally defined documentation requirements to be met.

Of all the factors considered, the most decisive for subject range seem to be resources and attitudes at the individual level, and funding at the intermediate level. All three not only have an independent effect on the subject range, but can also moderate the influence of other factors at the intermediate and system level, too.

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have developed a multi-level model to explain the subject range of mosque archives. The model is a hierarchical one, combining factors at the individual level with factors of two context levels, the intermediate and the system level. I have relied on diverse sources to describe the subject range of

mosque archives and the mechanisms that influence them: the academic literature on religious and community archives; the articles in this special issue; and the soundings of mosque archives in southern Germany.

It became clear that the factors at the individual level (resources and the attitudes of mosque personnel) and funding at the intermediate level are key for the building up of mosque archives that go beyond the level of ordinary bureaucracy, and are capable of testifying to the social and religious life of the mosque. The latter has till now been what is missing if common knowledge taken from public archives on the social and religious composition of German society is to be complemented by taking Muslim testimonies into account. In order to capture it, archival researchers, as well as mosque leaders, must go beyond conventional bureaucratic records, and widen their understanding of collecting in two respects. First, they must consider orally recounted history and personal story-telling as worthy of collection, and second, by reaching out to all kinds of community members – clergy and laity, men and women alike – they need to collate information about the Muslim contribution to social and religious life in Germany.

In order to facilitate this development in record-keeping, funding is indispensable in at least two regards: to recruit mosque personnel who are trained both in mastering everyday administration as well as in the creative appraisal and retention of records; and to acquire the physical space necessary for the durable preservation of those records. The latter may become less important over the coming years as the digitisation of mosque data progresses, but the need for funding will continue. The money that can be saved in this area needs to be invested in digital skills and archival training for community volunteers and paid mosque staff to ensure sustainable archiving. Only then will one prerequisite of many be fulfilled in order to give the testimonies of Muslim life a place in the collective memory of German society.

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