



**Applied Research
Center**

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Being a New Muslim in Mexico: Conversion as Class Mobility

Paper prepared for the
“Islam in Latin America Workshop”
April 2010

Camila Pastor de María y Campos

Islam in Mexico became particularly visible in 1995, when a Murabitun community emerged among Tzotzil indigenous populations in Chiapas. The mission's leader, the Spaniard Aureliano Perez Yruela, also known as *Emir Naifa*, describes himself as a Marxist before embracing Islam. He is said to have attempted communication with Marcos—the speaker for the Zapatista movement—in the hopes of convincing him of carrying on the Zapatista struggle in the name of Islam.¹ According to Fox and other press reports, there were about 300 local converts as of 2005, who participated in a carpentry workshop, a bakery, a restaurant and a school established by the Murabitun movement.

The Murabitun, a group made up largely of middle class, Western European converts, has developed a global reach. Its *Dawa* mission in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas, is a utopian community of sorts, providing employment, food, and education to its converts. Such arrangements provide clues to local perceptions of Islam, and thus to the logic of conversion in the Mexican context. I will claim that in a postcolonial setting, where hierarchies of race, class, and 'civilization' index and constitute each other in complex ways, conversion allows Muslims to either step outside of the local ideologies of dominance, or to sidestep them by establishing direct access to far away regions and the privileges of foreignness and cosmopolitanism.

Public performances of devotion, narratives surrounding the choice to convert, and a number of internet forums established by migrants suggest that conversion can be pursued as a gendered strategy of resistance to Mexican and global, postcolonial, class formations. The majority of converts come from lower middle class urban backgrounds. Many converts' narratives express a particular interest in the egalitarian message of Islam, and some argue that it provides an opportunity to build a Latin-American Nation:

La misión que se imponga la Nación Latinoamericana... debe ser digna y soberana, cumpliendo un mandato histórico que le permita acceder a un lugar de privilegio, que Allah—Dios Único— así lo permita. America Latina aspira a definir su propia modernización y reglas para los tratados comerciales, con una racionalidad distinta a la que hoy se vive, sin materialismo, sin consumismo y sin despilfarro de los recursos. Para continuar su emergencia civilizadora, la gente de Latinoamérica debe empezar dejando de asimilar lo ajeno como propio.²

This projection of a collective ascending trajectory has its counterpart in individual aspirations. Friends and family who have not converted sometimes interpret conversions as the pursuit of class distinction. Being Muslim is *different*, providing a marker of cosmopolitan distinction that becomes a strategy for exiting consumer society's mass produced identities and local taxonomies of class.

Migrants and Converts

Muslim communities in the Americas are made up of migrants—people from historically Muslim regions like the Middle East and South East Asia who have settled in the region, and a growing number of converts. Migrants and converts interact with each other and with global institutions of Islamic *dawa*, of invitation to the faith, in diverse dynamics of devotion. With Islam's expansion as a global faith in recent decades, boundaries between Muslims and nonbelievers have been increasingly standardized and disciplined, as has belief itself. This growing unification of dogma established and propagated by global Islamic missions contrasts with the diversity of regional Muslim practices.

Lebanese diplomatic personnel calculate that Muslims constitute about 5% of a total of 400,000 migrants and people of *Mashreqi* descent in Mexico: some 20,000 souls. Lindley-

Highfield cites an estimate of 39,000 Muslims in Mexico; 1000 to 2000 of them converts over the past decade. Tracing Muslim paths has been complicated by the fact that they did not establish sites of worship in the early decades of the twentieth century. Such institutional anchors played important roles as sites of participation where networks and belief could be cultivated by successive generations of migrants as in the case of various Christian and Jewish populations.

The absence of early institutions may be linked to the diversity of migrant Muslims; there are Druze, Sunni, and Shia among them. It could also be linked to the institutional organization of Islam, which relies on a body of legal scholars, that is, the *ulama*, and the academic institutions where they have traditionally been trained, rather than on a centralized ecclesiastical hierarchy like various branches of Christianity. It was through the synergy of local migrant efforts and the official bureaucracies that funding and staff support were provided for Maronite, Melkite, and Greek Orthodox churches of the migration. Migrant Muslims in Mexico are concentrated in the northern region of Torreon, where the early twentieth century Shia migration settled, and Mexico City, where Sunni and Druze have clustered throughout the twentieth century.

According to oral histories, many Mashreqi families of all religious traditions, especially those who settled in rural areas, eventually began participating in Catholic institutions. Muslim men who married local women, as many of them did, were often absorbed by their commercial projects and delegated the spiritual instruction of children to their Catholic mothers and their kin. These children were often baptized, and went on to complete Catholic ritual life cycles. The process is narrated in an interview by Omar Weston with Augusto Hugo Pena Delgadillo:

How many Muslim families are there in the Laguna region today?

Between 35 and 40, with 1170-220 individuals. Those are the ones who practice Islam, because if you count the children and grandchildren of the first Muslims that came here, there are at least 200 families ... The religious aspect took a back seat, since a lot of them married Christian Mexican women and did not do much to preserve Islam in their family. Some came from Syria [and Lebanon], and one at least from Palestine. Most Muslims, maybe all of the ones that came, are Shiites, the Palestinian Muslim was Sunni, and his children and grandchildren are Catholic today.³

Some descendants of these families have turned back to Islam in recent years, with the establishment of centers of Muslim education and worship in many Latin American cities.⁴

Most mosques and *musalas* in Latin America were built in the 1990's, even in areas that host significant Muslim migrations.⁵ Various Muslim places of worship have sprung up in and around Mexico City since the early 1990's. The most significant are the *Centro Educativo de la Comunidad Musulmana*, which was developed and established by migrants, and the *Centro Cultural Islamico de Mexico* with its center in Tequesquitengo.⁶ The CECM is hosted by a Pakistani Muslim and developed through the efforts of Pakistani and Moroccan embassy personnel who were temporarily in Mexico and sought a space for worship. The CCIM has also had gathering places in the Colonia Narvarte and Coyoacan. Though some participants are migrants from historically Muslim regions such as the Middle East and South Asia, sites and moments of Muslim worship are largely attended by Mexican converts. Conversion is also visible in Chiapas and Veracruz.⁷ There is also a branch of the Sufi order, *Nur Ashki Jerrahi*, in the Colonia Condesa, comprised of an upper and middle class profile. There is also a Salafi

group based in the Colonia Balbuena. They are an offshoot of the CCIM, and appear to be a smaller community and marginal to the others.

Conversion and Cosmopolitanism

The motivations and logics for conversion are multiple. Conversion, however, usually entails shifts in personal and family networks, and socialization into orthodox devotional practices. It should also be noted that in Mexico, as in other Latin American cases, conversion often operates through family “chains.” Converts who encounter Islam independently often convert parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.

To be Muslim in Mexico is to be cosmopolitan. Such cosmopolitanism indexes affluence by association with the prosperous Mashreqi migrant communities, with which one mingles with in spaces of worship. It indexes sophistication, given converts’ familiarity with Arabic calligraphy, prayers performed in Arabic (beginning with the *shahada*), and followed by frequent Muslim interjections which are spoken in Arabic, for example, *Asalamu alaikum wa rahmatu Allah wa barakatu, Alhamdulillah*, and *Mash’allah*. If you are young and male, it may even provide the opportunity of an Islamic education overseas, through a system of scholarships that fund young men who will return to lead converts and missions in their places of origin. Nagib Perez, a Mexican student of Arabic in Medina, interviewed six young men from Latin America who are students at the Islamic University of Medina; they are all men between 19 and 25. All of them emphasize that their favorite aspect of the experience is the companionship of people from all over the world; and the most difficult being away from their families.

Given the central role of modern technologies, such as the internet, in the process of socialization into the new religious community, conversion and participation in Muslim spaces

also index modernity and education, probably even a professional status. According to the former Imam's wife at the Mexico City *musala*, a Mexican convert herself, most women who embrace Islam in Mexico are professionals in their late twenties, from urban, lower class backgrounds. Omar Weston, another Mexican convert and the leader of the Tequesquitengo community, corroborated this portrayal, adding that most converts are young and come from humble backgrounds. A convert in Veracruz states: "most of us are young and we don't have tangible property, we have to look for work wherever it can be found."⁸

Many converts rely on the internet for the definition of ritual dates, for example the beginning and end of Ramadan, and as an authoritative source of Muslim texts and social prescriptions. The internet also provides forums where new Muslims discuss theological and personal issues, and locate fellow converts and migrants in neighboring regions and countries. A long debate initiated by a "rural Muslim" resulted in the following advice:

Assalam alaikom wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh

Para nuestro querido hermano Omar Cruz de Veracruz.

Recibe nuestro salam y un fraternal abrazo de mi esposo.

Tasnim e Ibrahim

La súplica que debe hacerse, para buscar consejo de ALÁH, antes de tomar una decisión importante. (Salat Al-Istijarah):

Cuando uno quiere realizar alguna cosa lícita y está indeciso sobre el mejor camino a seguir, recurre a una oración especial para percibir la iluminación divina, reza dos Rak'a voluntarias en cualquier momento del día o la noche, recita lo que quiera del Corán después de la

apertura (Al-Fátiha), alaba a ALÁH y pide bendición para su Mensajero; luego invoca a ALÁH con la siguiente súplica relatada por Al Bujari, en el Hadiz que dice:

ALÁHumma inni astajíruka bi'ilmíka, wa astaqdíruka biqudrátika taqdiru wala aqdir, wa ta'lamu wala a'lamu wa anta a'lamul-guiub.

ALÁHumma in kunta ta'lamu ana hadal-amra(en este momento menciona el asunto por el cual está haciendo la consulta) jairun li fi dini, wa ma'ashí wa'áquibat amri wa a'yilih,i wa ayilihi, faqdirhu wa iasirhu li, zumma bárik li fih wa in kunta ta'lamu ana hadal-amra

(En este momento menciona el asunto por el cual está haciendo la consulta) *sharun li fidíní, wa m'ashi wa 'aquíbatí amri, wa a'yilihi wa ayilihi, fasrifhu a'nni wasrifni a'nhu waqdir li'aljaíra haizucan, zumma ardini bihi.*

The Internet constitutes an important bridge, as the correspondence within *the Islam-en-tu-idioma* internet forum confirms. The new Muslims that interact, query, and debate with each other through this medium are scattered throughout Mexico: in rural areas of Veracruz, as well as the cities of Cardel and Xalapa; in Coahuila, Cancun, Guadalajara, Mexico City, Monterrey, Chetumal, Abasolo, Guanajuato; Morelia, Michoacán ... and they interact with others in Spain, Saudi Arabia, Uruguay, Argentina and Cataluña among other places.

Bibliography

Secondary Sources

ALFARO-VELCAMP, Theresa. "Mexican Muslims in the twentieth Century: Challenging stereotypes and negotiating space". In Y.Y. Haddad (ed.) *Muslims in the West: from sojourners to citizens*. Oxford University Press 2002

GARVIN, N. "Conversion and Conflict: Muslims in Mexico". *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World*. Review 15 (2) 18-19

ISMU KUSUMU, F. *El Islam en el México contemporáneo*. Master's Thesis. ENAH. Mexico D.F. 2004

LARA KLAHR, Marco. "El Islam en Chiapas? El EZLN y el Movimiento Mundial *Murabitun*". In *Islam y la nueva Jihad. Un Análisis Interdisciplinario sobre el 11 de septiembre desde America Latina*. Special issue of *Revista Académica para el Estudio de las Religiones*. 4: 79-91. 2002

LINDLEY-HIGHFIELD, Mark. "Muslimization, Mission and Modernity in Morelos: the problem of a combined hotel and prayer hall for the Muslims of Mexico." *Tourism, Culture & Communication*, Vol. 8, pp. 85–96. 2008

MORQUECHO ESCAMILLA, Gaspar. *Bajo la bandera del Islam: un acercamiento a la identidad política y religiosa de los musulmanes en San Cristóbal de Las Casas y algunas expresiones de*

conflicto que se han presentado durante el proceso de construcción de la comunidad islámica en Chiapas. Paper presented at the X Congreso Latinoamericano sobre Religión y Etnicidad: Pluralismo Religioso y Transformaciones Sociales held in San Cristóbal de Las Casas in July 2004. San Cristóbal de las Casas, México. Ediciones Pirata. 2004

RUIZ ORTIZ, J. M. “Entrevistas a mujeres Indígenas sobre el Islam”. *Anuario de Estudios Indígenas*, 9, 151-188

SANCHEZ GARCIA, J.L. *El influjo y el singular de los conversos mexicanos disidentes de cultos cristianos en la yamma de la Ciudad de México en la postrimería sigloventina y el primer trienio del siglo novel*. Undergraduate Thesis. ENAH. Mexico City. 2004

Periodicals

FOX, Conrad. “La Meca Chiapaneca” In *Gatopardo*. Mayo 2005

Islam en tu Idioma. Revista Bimestral. Vols. 1-5, Sept-Octubre 2005- Mayo-Junio 2006

¹ Morquecho, cited in Conrad Fox, “La Meca Chiapaneca” In *Gatopardo*. Mayo 2005

² Sheikh Yahya Susquillo, “Principios Islámicos para America Latina” *Islam en tu Idioma*. Revista Bimestral. Vol., Sept-Octubre 2005

³ **En la actualidad, cuantas familias musulmanas hay en la Laguna?**

35-40, con 1170-220 indivs. Estos son los practicantes del Islam, porque los hijos y nietos de los primeros musulmanes que llegaron por acá, hay por lo menos 200 familias... La cuestión religiosa se relegó debido a que muchos de ellos se casaron con Mexicana Cristiana y no hicieron mucho para preservar el Islam dentro de su familia.

...Algunos llegaron de Siria [y Líbano] y uno cuando menos de Palestina. La mayoría de musulmanes, quizás todos los que llegaron son chiítas y el palestino musulmán era sunni y sus hijos y nietos son católicos hoy. Published in *Islam en Tu Idioma*. Enero-Febrero 2006

⁴ My interview with Karim Nuñez and his family, Mexico City, 2005.

⁵ Also, see *Islam en tu Idioma*. Revista Bimestral. Vol., Sept-Octubre 2005. Announcement on the new Musala opening in Leon Guanajuato, p. 13; also the Mezquita Al-Dawa Islamica, and the Centro Islámico in Guatemala, active since 1995 and 1980 respectively .

⁶ Various interviews by the author in Mexico City, 2005. I thank Sherine Hamdy for guiding conversation on Muslim spaces of worship in Mexico City in the 1980's. The CCIM is headed by Omar Weston, a Mexican convert of British ancestry.

⁷ See Rosalva Aida Hernandez, Gaspar Morquecho Escamilla, Mario Lara Klahr and Ruiz Ortiz on Chiapas. Zidane Zeraoui is working on converts in Veracruz, and the Mexico City communities have been explored by Mark Lindley-Highfield, Sanchez Garcia and myself.

⁸ Abdullah, Omar. "La Comunidad de Musulmanes Veracruzanos" in *Islam en tu Idioma*. Revista Bimestral. Vol. 2. Nov-Dic 2005.