Shi'i Islam in the African-American Community

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Keywords

Abstract

While much has been written regarding the rise and experience of the African-American Muslim community, Western scholarship has paid little attention to the African-American Shi'is. This article will argue that, being a minority within the Muslim community in America, the Shi'i community is highly introverted and more concerned with preserving rather than extending its boundaries. In addition, the ethnic divisions within the Shi'i community and the fact that Shi'ism is highly reliant on foreign based leadership means that the Shi'i community has not been concerned with reaching out to potential converts.

The article will also argue that by their vehement attacks on the Shi'is, the Wahhabis have aroused the curiosity of many African-American converts who may have not heard of Shi'ism. Paradoxically, this has led to their conversion to Shi'ism. The chapter will also highlight instances of African-American Shi'i–Sunni altercations in correctional facilities.

The fact is that African-American Shi'is occupy the peripheries of mainstream America. The multiple layers of being in a minority status, to be explained below, place them between the ethnic-majority Shi'i communities (Indo-Pakistani/Arab/Iranian/Lebanese/Iraqi) and the Sunni African-American communities; thus emerges a wholly other vision of the surrounding

environment since African-American Shi'is occupy a separate socio-religious sphere. This chapter will examine the experience of African-American Shi'is, reasons for their conversion to Shi'ism, and the challenges they encounter. I will do this by examining some studies, interviews, and surveys on their experiences.

African-American Shi'is and Mainstream America

African-American Shi'is face multiple layers of ostracization. They are ostracized from the mainstream American white community due to their blackness and affiliation with a religion that has been depicted as intrinsically violent and militant. As a matter of fact, the media has frequently instilled a fear of Islam and depicted Muslim values as antithetical to American ones. While Muslims are stigmatized in news media, U.S. foreign policy, etc., African American Muslims are frequently seen as "not real" Muslims. For example, the African American Muslim community was not called upon to respond to events like Sept 11 2001. To date, the media has completely ignored the experiences of African American Shi'is; it is as if they do not exist. African-American Shi'is are also seen as heretics by the African-American Sunni community for their acceptance of Shi'ism. In addition, they are marginalized by the Shi'i community which is largely drawn along ethnic lines. Thus, they face the challenge of negotiating and asserting a Black, Muslim, and Shi'i identity in an often hostile socio-cultural setting that is mixed with the dominant society's Islamophobia.

Ethnicity within the American Shi'i Community

Muslims in America are a dynamic composite of peoples from an assortment of cultural contexts. When they accept Islam, converts encounter Muslim communities which are often

structured along ethnic lines. Many immigrant Muslims assert their own socio-cultural backgrounds as "the" standard for Islamic comportment, ostracizing and alienating African American converts. Converts' religious behaviors are then evaluated against often rigidly defined "homeland" renditions of the faith, since the immigrant community reasserts ethnic divides as an alienating force to bar Black converts from the privileges of equality integral to the purportedly color-blind faith.

Although Islam is supposedly premised along egalitarian lines, Muslims themselves frequently fail to practice this ideal. Instead, ethnic differences, national origins, racial characteristics, and experiences as a peoplehood are the composite factors that exacerbate divisions within the American Muslim community. The immigrant ethnic-majority safeguards its homeland's cultures in the immediacy of adjusting to America's unfamiliar nationhood; here, at the very least, the religious space is ethnically (and thus, recognizably) their own. [1]

It is immigrant Muslims' ethnic positioning as the dominant group that gives them the authority to structure the criteria for normative behavior and praxis. Immigrants use ethnicity as an edict to create an "other" and further organize power to define who the other is. Frequently, ethnicity itself becomes an important factor in creating "the other" within the Muslim community.

Through Shi'i Islam, African-American Shi'is hope to find not only spiritual fulfillment, but also a tool of socio-cultural reconstitution and justice. However, this hope is mitigated by the fact that unlike Sunni Islam, the overwhelming majority of American Shi'is are immigrants. Thus, African-American Shi'is form but a fringe minority. This means that African-American

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1. Jan-Therese Mendes, *Exploring Blacknesss from Muslim, Female, Canadian Realities: Founding Selfhood, (re)claiming Identity and Negotiating Belongingness within/against a Hostile Nation*, MA Thesis, McMaster University, 2011, p. 69.

Shi'is never had the kind of voice that black Muslims enjoyed especially in the 1950s and 60s. Nor did they experience communal conversion as the kind witnessed by black Sunnis from the Nation of Islam to Sunnism.

Black converts who are met with foreign cultural demands may choose to "surrender" to the authority of immigrants as a desperate attempt to attain some degree of social inclusion. A willful appropriation of South Asian, Iranian, or Arab versions of Shi'i Islam comes, however, at an uncomfortable cost. Ironically, converts likely forfeit their ties to a distinct Afrocentric identity in the act of conforming to an authority that has little to no grasp of the socio-political issues pertinent to living as a Black individual.[2] Particularly unsettling is that, in all probability, these efforts are not rewarded with full admission into the desired religio-cultural community, due to Shi'i immigrants' reluctance to take part and assist in converts' learning of Islamic tenets.

American Shi'i immigrants enjoy not only economic strength but also greater power. They have the financial and numerical superiority to establish centers and a self-proclaimed right to dictate how the centers will be run. In many American cities, Shi'i centers have become the exclusive property of ethnic immigrants. It is the immigrants who determine who will speak at the centers and what issues will be addressed. African-American Shi'is can attend but hardly participate in mosque programs. They are not invited to speak nor voice their concerns and needs. Since they are not represented at administrative levels in mosques, African-American Shi'i voices or concerns are rarely heard or addressed. Preachers in the mosques will discuss issues pertaining to history, jurisprudence, ethics etc. Rarely, if ever, will issues like racism, poverty, unemployment, integrating converts into the Shi'i community, the needs and concerns of converts be discussed from the pulpit.

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[2] Rouse, Carolyn M. *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2004), 42-3.

Immigrants tend to see themselves not only as the carriers of an "authentic Islam" but also as obligated to impose their understanding of Islam in the American milieu. For many immigrants, a good Muslim is one who has been able to import and impose his culture to the American milieu. Indeed, imitation or appropriation of elements of American culture is seen by immigrants as tantamount to cultural treason or unbelief.

This has the effect of alienating both converts to Islam and the burgeoning youth community that often accuses the parents of imposing a "culturally-conditioned Islam." As a matter of fact, African-American Shi'is have often reported being 'othered' within the Shi'i community, indicating that exhibiting shared religiosity is simply not enough to draw them into the realm of acceptability within the immigrant Shi'i community which may prize ethnic-cohesion over ideals like universal brotherhood. For African-American Shi'is, this ethnic separatism frequently punctuates their interactions with the ethnic-majority Shi'i population (of Indo-Pakistani, Iranian, or Arab descent). To date, there is no independent African-American Shi'i institution that can challenge the monopoly that immigrant Shi'is enjoy. Stated differently, there is no Shi'i equivalent of the Nation of Islam or any other Black Muslim movement that can match the way that immigrant mosques are run.

These observations are corroborated by a recent survey of female Shi'i converts conducted by Inloes and Takim. Most of the respondents described a moderate to severe sense of exclusion from the Shi'i community for racial, cultural, and linguistic reasons. In addition to feeling socially excluded, some also experienced difficulty in learning more about the faith due to the infrequency of religious services in English. Respondents who had converted first to Sunnism and then to Shi'ism reported a much stronger sense of belonging among Sunnis.

The study concludes that American and Canadian women convert to Shi'ism from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds which roughly mimic the ethnic and religious composition of America and Canada. Upon conversion, they usually experience a sense of social exclusion from both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims, and often experience difficulty learning more about their faith. Unlike female converts to Sunnism, female converts to Shi'ism cope with a multiple minority status arising from membership in several minority groups; Black women express the severest sense of marginalization.

Converts to Shi'ism often cope with these challenges through assimilation to traditionally Shi'i cultures (including the learning of languages other than English); participation in female devotional practices; attending religious meetings run by Shi'i converts; participating in online Shi'i groups; expressing ownership of their faith through contributing to the Shi'i community, including – in a minority of cases – taking on leadership roles; and viewing their struggles in the broader context of being members of a historically oppressed religious community. Last, but not least, while the most significant challenges to their faith come from within the Shi'i community itself, for many converts their faith gives them the strength and optimism to persevere.[3]

Several women also reported that the most profound effect of their conversion on their identity was a greater sense of marginalization. In particular, Black women spoke of the pressure of adjusting to a quadruple minority status, as a minority (Blacks) within a minority (converts) within a minority (Shi'is) within a minority (Muslims) in North America. In addition to experiencing prejudice as Muslims, such as difficulty finding a job or verbal harassment due to the *hijab* – many women also experienced prejudice from Sunnis. This multi-layered minority

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[3] Amina Inloes and Liyakat Takim "Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Female Converts to Shi'ism in the United States and Canada" Studies in Religion (forthcoming in 2013).

status was specifically identified as a major stressor.[4] The findings of the survey corroborate the major thesis of this chapter, that African-American Shi'is, male or female, report various levels of prejudices.

The afore-mentioned survey and my discussions and interviews with many African-American Shi'is makes it clear that many Shi'i converts experience a religio-social-racial and gendered sense of marginalization from the Shi'i immigrant community. This marginalization significantly impacts their religious experience as well as other aspects of their lives; for instance, many subjects reported feeling unwelcome in places of worship, having difficulty learning more about Shi'ism, or being unable to marry within the Shi'i community.[5]

It is to be further noted that for those who have converted, there are enormous social pressures to reject Shi'i Islam. Especially after the events of 911, many converts who go to mosques feel isolated as they have been forced to abandon their family ties. They are also marginalized in the mosques as they do not fit within the framework of the ethnic centers. Even when immigrant Shi'is engage in inter-faith dialogue, African-American Shi'is are hardly ever present. Hence, their views and concerns are never represented at such sessions. Such exclusivist attitudes by the immigrant community further marginalize African-American Shi'is. In response to the marginalization they encounter, in some American cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Rhode Island, African-American Shi'is have chosen to establish their own mosques for their community.

Shi'i Immigrants and the Preservation of Boundaries

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[4] Ibid.

[5] See Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in Ameica*, chapter 5.

Shi'is have historically been concentrated in only a few regions worldwide, so most Shi'i immigrants to America are of either Iranian, South Asian, Iraqi, East African, or Lebanese origins. Due to centuries of hostilities and a desire to maintain their distinct minority identities, Shi'i communities are, generally speaking, inward rather than outward looking, more concerned with self-preservation rather than expansion; for instance, a 2009 study found that Shi'i mosques in America overwhelmingly dedicated their financial resources to communal activities rather than outreach efforts or serving the needs of converts.[6] Similarly, in the survey of Inloes and Takim mentioned above, all the women (except for two associated with Shi'i convert organizations) reported a complete lack of encouragement or support in becoming Shi'i. As a result, many women described being Shi'i in spite of the community rather than because of it.[7]

Few centers are involved in any extensive dialogue with other Muslim or non-Muslim communities. Instead, more stress is laid on providing basic religious services to members of the community accentuating thereby the distinct beliefs and rituals of Shi'i Islam. Moreover, since most religious centers in America have been established fairly recently, Shi'i Muslims have used their financial resources to establish and consolidate their centers rather than to build bridges outside the community. A question in the survey I conducted in 2002 related to the types of *da'wa* (missionary) activities undertaken by the centers. Most centers did not respond to the question. It was clear that most Shi'i communities emphasize providing religious services to their community members than reaching out to the non-Muslim community. The immigrants' major concern is to preserve the traditional expression of Islam than to reach out to potential converts.

The sense of exclusivism within the immigrant Shi'i community can be discerned from the following observation. The Universal Muslim Association of America (UMAA) is a national

[6] Takim, Liyakat, Shi'ism in America (New York: New York Univ Press, 2009), p. 186.
[7] Inloes and Takim, "Giving Voice to the Voiceless".

Shi'i body established in 2002. It seeks to provide a forum to foster unity among Muslims, to encourage Muslims to fulfill civic and political responsibilities, to dispel misgivings about Islam and Muslims, and help Americans better understand Islam in the light of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his family. UMAA also seeks to promote an accurate portrayal of Islam and encourage both inter and intra-faith dialogue. It provides a forum to foster effective grassroots participation by Muslims in the United States and to network with other organizations.[8] Although it has held annual conferences for ten years, so far, not a single session has been held to discuss the needs and concerns of African-American Shi'is. Nor have African-American Shi'is ever been invited to address their issues.

The focus on preservation rather than extension of boundaries is further corroborated by my survey of converts. It indicates that most converts from the Afro-American community convert to Shi'ism as a result of their own efforts and research rather than due to extensive proselytization from the Shi'i community. Fifty percent of those who converted to Shi'ism said they did so as a result of their own study whereas twenty five percent said because of someone else's persuasion. Significantly, not one said that they had been approached by a Shi'i institution. This further confirms the view that when it comes to *da'wa* (proselytization), the Shi'i community has been largely passive and inert.

Immigrant Shi'is can boast not only a long association with Shi'i Islam but also the support of preachers who articulate a Shi'ism that is often shaped by cultural forces imported from "back home." This is because most Shi'i preachers in America are from the Indian sub-continent or the Middle East. Even the Shi'i religious leaders, the *maraji'*,[9] have yet to

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[8] See the constitution of UMAA.

[9] A marji', singular of maraji', is the most learned juridical authority in the Shi'i community whose rulings on the shari'a (Islamic moral-legal law) are followed by his adherents. In the absence of the twelfth Shi'i

acknowledge or address the particular needs of the African-American community in America. The *maraji'*, who live primarily in Iran and Iraq, are more concerned with providing guidance and religious instruction to their followers than with reaching out to new converts in America. Even though they have tremendous financial resources generated by religious taxes (the *khumus*), the *maraji'* have yet to establish institutions that can reach out to and cater for the needs of African-American Shi'is in America.[10] For example, the Detroit-based Imam Mahdi Association of Marjaeya (IMAM), a liaison office of one of the most prominent Shi'i religious leaders, Ayatullah al-Sayyid 'Ali Hussein al-Seestani, has yet to create an effective mechanism or chart out a program to reach out to African-American Shi'is.

There is a concurrent need to create an umbrella body that will co-ordinate *da'wa* activities within the Shi'i community. Currently, there is no central institution where non-Muslims can inquire about the Shi'a faith. Most Shi'i centers do not have proper literature or personnel who can help potential converts. There are no special classes conducted for those who have converted and the topics covered in the lectures are not always relevant to the need for potential or recent converts.

Challenges for African-American Shi'is

African-American Shi'is are in quest for an Islamic self-definition with sustained cultural relevance to their distinct concerns and history. They need to forge an identity within Shi'i Islam yet without the ethnic identity of the various Shi'i groups. In other words, they are not looking

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Imam, the marji' assumes the responsibility of re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic norms to the modern era. He is thus able to impinge on the religious and social lives of his followers.

[10] Among the various dues that the maraji' receive is the khumus, a religious tax of twenty percent that is levied on net savings. According to Shi'i jurists, khumus is to be paid on income and other forms of wealth. Half of the khumus is to be distributed to the needy from the descendants of the Prophet, whereas the other half is to be spent for the welfare of the community.

for an extraneously imposed culturalized Shi'ism but a Shi'ism that will address their own needs and concerns. The challenge for African-American Shi'is is to initiate a discourse on dynamics that will integrate them to the various ethnic centers in American Shi'ism.

African-American Shi'is' place in the Islamic world is framed by an avid effort to maintain their identity in the midst of a foreign mosque culture, particularly paramount since immigrant influences bracket numerous aspects of their social and religious lives. To assert this identity, there is a need for internal cohesiveness and black leadership that will alleviate the marginalization that they face from their fellow Shi'is on the one hand, and from other Muslims on the other.

For African-American Shi'is, their shared socio-religio-racial marginality, should, potentially, act as a site for inciting a sense of camaraderie towards one another. However, due to a dearth of financial resources and leadership within the African-American Shi'i community, there has been little effort to bring them together.

The establishment of African-American Shi'i mosques can be an alternative outcome of anti-Black/anti-Islam prejudice helping to induce a "we", togetherness, a defensive solidarity – for blacks coming together. They can discuss issues and initiate dialogue that addresses matters of their concerns, in the process, invigorating each other with the capacity to challenge or minimize the impact of extraneous forces.

An African American Shi'i identity can be understood to, partially, alleviate a longing for self-affirmation by equipping themselves with both the cognitive space and a recognizable socio-racial-cultural community wherein they can produce a refined notion of their personhood. It is in these centers that African-American Shi'is can channel black consciousness and ideology, aspiration and fight against racism, socio-economic justice within the framework of Shi'i Islam

at the same time developing a conscious ideology that would distinguish them from black Sunnis.

Why Convert to Shi'ism?

Islam is one of the prominent spiritual avenues for resistance that have been embraced by peoples of African descent from their earliest inceptions in North America. Robert Dannin and Karen Leonard explain the Black allegiance to Islam through the "functional benefits" it provides for a racial group in rehabilitation from the psychological abuses inflicted upon them by white hegemonic forces since the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade; essentially these scholars emphasize a practicality to Islamic membership seeing as, the faith enables Blacks to establish empowering religious ties and ancestral claims that are distinctively "dissimilar from" and thus "alternative to" the normative systems of mainstream culture.[11]

In general terms, conversion is made analogous with a series of positive effects which inspire the formation of identities that are compatible with the new religious ethos. The convert's development of a Muslim sense of self is said to be invigorated through the following: 1. the emergence of feelings of "belonging" and "acceptance" in addition to provisions of a personal and cosmic identity; 2. an incorporation into a "ready-made" community that embraces the convert and holds them in esteem; and 3. the empowerment of acquiring "resolution and clarity of purpose" in the act of conversion itself. Conversion thus transpires as a revitalizing force according to these scholastic renderings; even so, these processes/by-products of conversion are not necessarily duplicated within the particular factors, or incentives, that denote the experiences of Black persons who join Islam.[12]

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[11] Quoted in Mendes, Exploring Blacknesss, 43.
[12] Ibid, 52-3.

Since it has been a minority in much of the Islamic world, Shi'ism bears a sense of what Charles Long has called "lithic consciousness" – a state of mind and being that in confronting reality invokes a will in opposition, a veritable cosmic no.[13] Black religion is, at its core, an instrument of protest against any form of oppression. Concepts like a "reactionary no" and a "protest sentiment" are deeply ingrained within Shi'i Islam.

The spirits of resistance and opposition to injustice could be perpetuated to its fullest extent in Shi'i rather than Sunni Islam. The latter had, on many occasions, accommodated itself to tyrannical rulers as it did not want to create *fitna* (sedition). Many traditions were circulated to quell opposition to the ruling elite. An evil ruler, it was declared, was better than anarchy in the community. Obedience to the rulers was tantamount to obedience to God.[14] From its very beginning, Shi'ism, on the contrary, was rooted in the concepts of protest and resistance to oppression. Stated differently, African-Americans are not seeking freedom from sin or salvation by accepting a messianic figure; rather they are seeking freedom from bondage and racial subjugation, which, in the view of African-American Shi'is, could be more fully fulfilled in Shi'ism.

The Shi'i claim that the rights of 'Ali and the family of the Prophet (also called the *ahl al-bayt*) were usurped by the companions meant that, from the very beginning, Shi'ism rose as a dissenting group in opposition to the Muslim majority. This protest manifested itself in different forms during the course of Shi'i history. Initially, Shi'i protest expressed itself by contesting Abu Bakr's succession to the Prophet advocating instead, the succession of 'Ali based on the

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[13] As quoted by Sherman Jackson, "Preliminary Reflections on Islam and Black Religion," in Muslims' Place in the American Public Square, Zahid H. Bukhari, Sulayman S. Nyang, Mumtaz Ahmad, and John L. Esposito, eds., Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004, 206.

[14] Ignaz Goldziher, Muslim Studies, 2 volumes, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971, 2/94-5. See also Bryan Turner, Weber and Islam: A Critical Study (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 92.

principle of divine designation.[15] Later conflicts between 'Ali b. Abi Talib and Mu'awiya (d. 679), Husayn (d. 680) and Yazid (d. 684), and the various Shi'i revolts against both the Umayyad and 'Abbasid dynasties were further manifestations of these differences.[16] Subsequently, political opposition and rebellion against a central, Sunni-dominated government formed the basis of the development of a distinct sectarian movement that postulated its own concept of religious authority and leadership.

The following anecdote from a Shi'i convert is a good example of the attraction of Shi'ism and its opposition to oppression. The convert, Hashim 'Ali 'Ala al-Din states, "I took the name Hashim because I found it in a book of African names which, said that it was Egyptian and meant one who "crushes and destroys evil". This was a name which fit my characteristics. I wanted to destroy evil and establish justice - so people began to call me Hashim. Later on, I found out that this name was associated with Shi'a Islam since the Prophet's tribe is called Bani Hashim. But when I became Muslim I needed to finish the naming process and complete my Islamic identity."[17]

The Shi'i paradigm of opposition to tyranny and injustice was further emboldened by the Iranian revolution. Khumayni's defiance of America and his characterization of it as the great Satan was a view that African-American Shi'is could readily endorse. As a matter of fact, many African-Americans converted to Shi'ism after visiting or reading about Iran. They were impressed by the revolutionary fervor of the Iranian regime. More than any other factor, it was

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[15] See Liyakat Takim, The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam, Albany: SUNY, 2006, chapter one.

[16] Examples are the revolts of Muhammad bin. 'Abd Allah (Nafs al-Zakiyya) (d. 762), Husayn bin 'Ali (d. 786) and Abu Saraya (d. 815). For a discussion on various ʾAlid revolts against the 'Abbasids, see Hugh Kennedy, The Early 'Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History, London: Croom Helm, 1981; C. Huart, "'Alids," Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam, eds. H. A. Gibb and J.H. Kramer, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974, 32-33.

[17] Confirmed in email correspondence in 2008.

the Iranian revolution and its defiance of American hegemony in the Middle East that attracted many American Blacks to Shi'ism.

The Iranian influence on African-American Shi'is can be discerned from the fact that in the 1980s and 1990s, many African-Americans were invited to visit the country. Some of them decided to study in the religious seminary in Qum. Along with several other African-American Shi'is, Hashim 'Ali 'Ala al-Din, for example, studied with the scholars of Qum. While studying in Iran in the 1990s, he saw the need to help others understand Shi'ism. Hashim 'Ala al-Din helped establish the Islamic Foundation Cooperation (IFC), an institution that helps African American Shi'is visit the tomb of the eighth Shi'i Imam, 'Ali al-Rida (d. 818), in Mashad and encourages them to take short-term courses in Iran.[18] As is the case with many converts to Shi'ism, Hashim's conversion was helped by the Iranian revolution. He states, "As I began to meet with immigrant Muslims I heard there were people called Shi'as and Sunnis. But I was fortunate that all the Shi'as and Sunnis around me believed and followed the line of Imam Khomeini and *wahda* (Unity)."

Besides the Iranian factor, Shi'ism posited role models who African-American Shi'is could derive inspiration from in their quest for socio-economic justice. Shi'i Imams, especially 'Ali and Husayn, have become role models as they opposed and fought against rebels and tyrannical regimes. Such notions resonate strongly with Black Americans who have suffered from racism, oppression, unemployment, and discrimination in White America. Shi'ism offered African-Americans not only the spirit but also the role models of protest and resistance to tyranny. Iran and Hizbollah provided the contemporary paradigm of release from bondage and subjugation to America. Islam gave African-Americans a new identity as it was considered to be "the other." Shi'ism, however, was the other within the other.

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[18] See http://www.islamifc.org/test/index.php.

A recent survey speculates on another possible reason for converts' attraction to Shi'ism. The survey, mentioned above, conducted by Inloes and Takim, quotes most converts as stating that they came from a Christian background. Although they were asked their prior religion, they were not asked their prior religious denomination. Nonetheless, 11 out of 31 volunteered that they had been raised Catholic. This unusually high figure lends credence to the common speculation that Catholics are more attracted to Shi'ism than Sunnism due to similarities between Shi'ism and Catholicism, such as the veneration of holy personalities and a stronger religious hierarchy.[19]

Conversion for African-American Shi'is is both a contemplative process as well as a weighted act that often affirms their spiritual values. It had a special appeal for many in the Black community. In the survey by Inloes and Takim, all but one of the respondents emphasized their intellectual acceptance of Shi'ism; they cited books they had read and said they had chosen Shi'ism because it 'made sense'. Converts from Sunnism to Shi'ism, in particular, discussed theological and historical differences between the two sects and cited pro-Shi'i polemical literature, such as the books by Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi,[20] which were mentioned by no less than four women. Respondents who had converted directly to Shi'ism also gave similar reasons for selecting Shi'ism over Sunnism.

This may be a reflection of the Shi'i belief that the main tenets of the faith must be arrived at through logic and contemplation, and may not be followed blindly. However, regardless of whether or not the intellectual aspect of the conversion was truly the primary

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[19] Inloes and Takim, Giving Voice to the Voiceless.

[20] Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi (b. 1943) is a Tunisian Islamic scholar and enthusiastic convert from Sunnism to Shi'ism. He has penned numerous books arguing that the Shi'i sect of Islam represents the original teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Four of his books have been translated into English and have been published as Then I was Guided, Ask those who Know, To Be with the Truthful, and The Shi'ah are the (Real) Ahl al-Sunnah.

motivation, by providing intellectually oriented conversion narratives, these converts in the survey showed that they are heavily invested in their belief on an intellectual level which is independent from their social experiences with other Shi'is. Therefore, this focus on independent intellectual conviction is likely to be a major factor in their retention in the faith.

Other converts also mentioned spiritual experiences (such as prayer, dreams, and miraculous signs) as a factor in their conversion, although they emphasized that their primary motivation for conversion was intellectual; several who had converted from Sunnism to Shi'ism also said that their faith had become stronger after converting to Shi'ism or that they felt that Shi'ism offered them a greater sense of spirituality. It is often assumed that women convert to Shi'ism because they are married to a Shi'i man. However, in the survey, only one of the women said that she had converted because of marriage.

In a survey I conducted, when asked to write down the three most important reasons they had converted to Islam, eight converts replied they converted because of the doctrine of *tawhid* (oneness of God) as opposed to that of trinity. Other reasons cited were the political dimension of Islam, the structure of Islam, respect for and equality of women in Islam, fear of going to hell, and the sense of brotherhood prevalent in Islam. It is also significant to note that my survey indicates that some converts accepted Shi'ism due to the proliferation of Sunni literature that disrespected and denigrated the Shi'is.[21] This made them more curious and then led them to finding out more about Shi'i beliefs and practices.

African-American Shi'ism and Black Sunnism

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[21]"Preserving or Extending Boundaries? The Black Shi'is of America." *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30, no. 2 (2010): 237-249.

African-American Shi'is share the experience of conversion with African American Sunnis. However, this is where their similarities end. African-American Shi'is encounter prejudice from fellow blacks who have turned against them for their acceptance of Shi'ism. Due to this factor, by their conversion to Shi'ism, African-American Shi'is are alienated not only from their family and friends but also from the African-American Sunni community which feels betrayed by the African-American Shi'is. In all probability, this explains the numerous cases of discrimination and violence reported by African-American Shi'is in correctional facilities. In fact, many of them complain that their precepts and praxis are attacked more by Sunnis than by non-Muslims.

There have been very few studies on African-American Shi'ism in the correctional facilities. It is correct to state that in America, Sunni and Shi'i confrontations are felt most acutely in correctional facilities. For Shi'i inmates, the adoption of Shi'ism has meant embracing new sets of obligations and role models. Instead of the companions of the Prophet, the role models became the Prophet and the Shi'i Imams. The *fiqh* (jurisprudence) of Abu Hanifa (d. 767) or Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 820) was replaced by that of Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), the sixth Shi'i imam. Sunni *hadith* texts and manuals of jurisprudence had to be replaced by Shi'i ones. After conversion, Shi'i inmates had to base their religious practices on the juridical treatises (*risala 'amaliyya*) of Shi'i *maraji'* like Ayatullahs Seestani, Fadlallah, or Khamenei. Such shifts have often resulted in altercations and sectarian tensions within the correctional facilities.

Differences between Sunni and Shi'i inmates cover many aspects of Islamic law. Shi'i inmates, for example, will not celebrate the end of Ramadhan based on statements from Sunni Imams, ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) or the Sunni-based *Fiqh* Council of America. Rather, they will wait to hear the pronouncements from the offices of the *maraji'* confirming that

the new moon has been sighted. In 2005, the Council of Shi'a '*Ulama*' of North America formed a *hilal* committee that will decide when the new Islamic month begins. Due to such differences, Shi'i inmates do not celebrate Islamic holidays like the end of Ramadhan (*eid*) feast with their Muslim brethren.

Furthermore, Shi'is have their own distinctive religious holidays which Sunnis do not commemorate. Shi'is mark the day of '*Ashura*' when Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was slain in the plains of Kerbala, Iraq, in 680 C.E.. Similarly, Shi'is mark the day of Ghadir (in the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar) when, Shi'is believe, the Prophet Muhammad had appointed 'Ali to succeed him.

When asked in my survey if they had experienced any difficulty as Shi'i Muslims, all of them replied in the affirmative. Shi'i inmates claim they encounter widespread discrimination and pressure to renounce their faith. Many inmates complain that Shi'i books kept in the prison libraries have been removed by Sunni inmates. The acrimony between the two groups has often led to physical confrontation within the correctional facilities and to some inmates being placed in isolation 'boxes'. Shi'i inmates now demand lectures that reflect their own faith and the right to perform rituals according to Shi'i law. Many inmates are also tormented by hearing anti-Shi'i propaganda in the classes conducted or in Friday sermons. There are very few correctional facilities that offer classes catering to the Shi'is.

Other inmates cited the following grievances:

Denied right of being a Muslim by non-Shi'a brothers (e.g. can't vote for a leader, can't hold positions in mosques)

No access to Shi'a learning materials

Sunni brothers turning their backs in times of difficulty

To non-Muslims Shi'is is a stereo type of 'suicidal terrorist'

Accused of trying to assassinate a Sunni Amir.

Sunnis providing most classes, for adults and children; the Sunni pre-occupation with Aisha

hadiths; Sunni attitude of righteousness

Being considered a "radical" minority within a minority

In some instances, Shi'i inmates have been discriminated against in the same facilities

where Sunnis demanded their rights. At Green haven Correctional Facility, for example, inmate

Brown charged that prison officials discriminated against him and his coreligionists by

prohibiting religious services, spiritual advice, and administration from recognized clergy of the

Islamic faith. Shi'i inmates at the same facility complain that Shi'i literature has been removed

from the library and that they have endured other kinds of discrimination.

I have included only a small number of complaints that I received from a number of Shi'i

inmates. Most of them state that their lives are threatened more by Sunni than by non-Muslim

inmates. Paradoxically, when African-American Sunnis have demonstrated that they have not

received the same treatment as other religious groups in prison, the courts have, generally

speaking, upheld and protected their constitutional claims to religious freedom.[22] However, these

inmates have denied Shi'is the same rights that they claimed for themselves, i.e., to practice

Islam according to their tenets. The attacks by African-American Sunnis often mean that African

Americans are against rather than with each other in the struggle to assert their identity and fight

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[22] See the examples cited by Kathleen Moore, "Muslims in Prison: Claims to Constitutional Protection of Religious Liberty," in Yvonne Haddad, ed., The Muslims of America, p.141.

for socio-economic justice in America. Sunni African-Americans do not see a comrade in the struggle against racism when they gaze into the face of an African-American Shi'i; instead they perceive a hostile "other."

The sense of isolation that Shi'i inmates experience is compounded by the fact that conversion to Shi'ism also means, for them, a change of social network and friendship. The much wider network of Sunni brethren who provided support, protection, and religious guidance is replaced by a much smaller group of Shi'i inmates, most of whom have endured some form of sectarian discrimination. Thus, the challenges for Shi'i converts arise not only from dealing with non-Muslim inmates but also from interaction with Muslim ones.

Conclusion

Immigration of Shi'is to America, the Iranian revolution, the advent of Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Internet, and greater access to Shi'i literature have made Shi'ism an American rather than a purely foreign phenomenon. These factors, plus the Wahhabi denouement of Shi'ism, have encouraged many African-Americans, including those in correctional facilities, to look at Shi'ism as an alternative articulation of normative Islam. Since the 1980s there has been a gradual but steady increase in the number of African-Americans converting to Shi'ism both inside and outside the correctional facilities.

Like African-American Shi'is outside the prison facilities, the majority of Shi'i inmates seek empowerment through education. They seek a *da'wa* team that could educate and guide them. These inmates are concerned that the religious education offered in the prison system teaches Sunni Islam exclusively. Shi'i inmates do not have access to normative Shi'i texts or facilities to educate them about Shi'i history, theology, or jurisprudence. Most of their

knowledge on Shi'ism is derived from their fellow Shi'i inmates who are better versed but certainly not experts in Shi'i Islam.

African-American Shi'ism has yet to evolve into a fully-fledged movement. So far, it has been occupied with defending itself from attacks by the Wahhabis and African-American Sunnis and with navigating itself through the maze of ethnically-conditioned immigrant Islam. African-American Shi'is need to forge a distinct identity within and integrate into Shi'ism without compromising their distinctive black consciousness. They also need to foster an ideology that will distinguish them from other Black American movements. In addition, they need to nurture leadership and establish institutions in their fight against racism and socio-economic injustice within the framework of American Shi'i Islam.

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