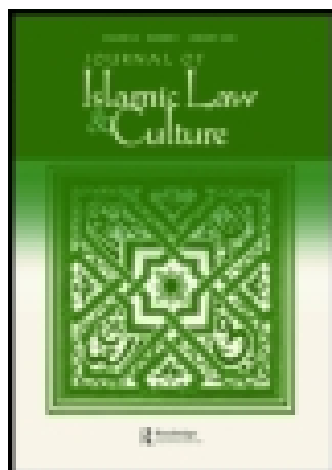


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A minority with diversity: the Shi'i community in America

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A minority with diversity: the Shi'i community in America

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The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of Muslims to the American shores. The increased presence and visibility of Muslims in America means that Islam is no longer to be characterized as a Middle Eastern or South Asian phenomenon. Given the fact that it is the fastest growing religion in America, Islam is now a very American phenomenon. Hence the familiar categorization of 'Islam and the West' should be reformulated to read 'Islam in the West.'

Most scholars have focused on the experience of Sunni Muslims in America. They often postulate a monolithic Islam that expresses the 'normative Islam.' Hence any variant religious expression is perceived as an aberration that is to be ignored or discarded. This paper will outline the salient features that characterize the Shi'i community in America. It will also examine the challenges the community encounters living as a minority within the broader Muslim community.

The article will argue that divisions within the American Shi'i community are often exacerbated by the establishment of ethnic institutions that act as cultural buffers. These institutions conduct services and enact rituals along the lines that were established "back home," marginalizing, in the process, Shi'is who come from different ethnic backgrounds. It will be argued that far from being a monolithic group, the American Shi'i community comprises a mosaic of diverse ethnic and cultural groups that have settled in America. As a matter of fact, it is possible to speak of a 'rainbow' nature of Shi'i Islam.

Keywords: American Muslims; American Islam; American Shi'ism; Detroit; ethnic; Husayn; immigrants; Iranian Shi'is; Iraqis; Kerbala; Khojas; *khuṭabā*; Lebanese; Shi'is; Michigan City; MSA-PSG; South Asian Shi'is; Twelver Shi'is

The composition of the American Muslim community is far from homogeneous. In fact, American Islam is a mosaic of many ethnic, racial, sectarian, and national groups. Many scholars who study the phenomenon of American Islam tend to homogenize American Muslims. In academic discourses and classes, most discussions equate Islam in America with the Sunni experience or with that of the indigenous African American Muslims. Very little has been written about the origins and experiences of minority groups within the American Muslim community.¹

This article seeks to redress that imbalance. It will adumbrate the salient features that characterize five disparate Twelver-Shi'i communities in America and the various challenges they encounter living as a minority within the broader Muslim community.² The paper is

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¹An exception to this is Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America* (University Press of Florida, Gainesville 1993).

²In this paper, the term Shi'i is will be used to refer exclusively to the Twelver Shi'is.

not intended to be a comprehensive study of the various Shi'is communities in America, but rather a sampling of the range and variety of Shi'i groups in America. In discussing the matrix of forms through which the culture of the different Shi'i groups is expressed, it will be seen that, far from being a monolithic group, even the Shi'i community comprises a mosaic of diverse ethnic and cultural groups that have settled in America.

The early Shi'is in America

According to Jane Smith, the Twelver Shi'is, together with the Ismai'lis, form about a fifth of the American Muslim community.³ This is a significant observation for it has been often assumed that the Shi'i community comprises a very small segment of the Muslim community in America. It may well be this misapprehension that has led to the assumption that the community does not merit a comprehensive study.⁴

Starting from the 1870s, Muslims arrived in the USA in a number of distinct waves.⁵ The first wave came between 1875 and 1912. Among those who migrated to America at this time were Shi'is who came from South Lebanon.⁶ Many of these Shi'is settled in Detroit, Michigan to work in the Ford Motor Company. In addition to Detroit, there was a sizable Shi'i community in Michigan City, Indiana. An early migrant to Michigan City was Hussein Hussein Ayad, who was born in Mazra'at al-Jazirat, on the banks of the Litany River in Lebanon in 1890.⁷ He chose to come to Michigan City in 1902 because of the presence there of many people of Syrian origins. Like many others, he first worked for a train company, laying tracks. Later, he worked in a steel factory. According to Ayad, the first Muslim society was formed in 1914 in Michigan City. The organization was called "al-Badr al-Munir" and was headed by Hussein Aboudheeb.

Ayad goes on to confirm that there were over 200 families in Michigan City in 1924, when Asser El Jadeed, another local institute, was formed and the first mosque built. He also recalls that there was much interaction between the Muslims and Christians at that time. The migration and settlement of Shi'i families in Michigan City at the beginning of the twentieth century is further corroborated by many anecdotal accounts from their descendants. Julia Harajali was born in Michigan City in 1920. Her father migrated to Michigan City in 1907. According to her, many of the early Shi'i migrants settled there rather than in Detroit to work in the Pullman car factory. Julia confirms that there was a vibrant Shi'i community in Michigan City in the 1920s and 1930s. According to her, many Shi'is left for Dearborn when better employment opportunities arose there.

The dramatic growth in and the diverse nature of the Shi'i population in America is a relatively recent phenomenon. In part, this has been a response to changes in American immigration laws. Other factors have also precipitated increased migration to America. Adverse socio-political conditions in the Middle East, Pakistan and India have occasioned

³Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (Columbia University Press, New York 1999) 30.

⁴Liyakatali Takim, *The Shi'i Experience in America* (forthcoming).

⁵Gutbi Ahmed, 'Muslim Organizations in the United States' in Yvonne Haddad (ed.), *The Muslims of America* (Oxford University Press, New York 1991) 11; Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (Oxford University Press, New York 1992) 27; Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (Oxford University Press, New York 1987) 13–15.

⁶Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, op. cit. 19.

⁷I am grateful to Ron Amen, the facility manager at the Arab American National Museum in Detroit, for sharing with me a transcribed copy of an interview which Hussein Ayad gave to John P. Brennan, a representative of the Public Library of Michigan City. There is no mention of the date when the interview took place.

increased migration to the West. In addition, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the inimical socio-political conditions in Iraq, civil strife in Pakistan, the division of Pakistan into two states, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the civil war in Lebanon, adverse socio-economic conditions in East Africa and the establishment of the anti-Shi'i Taliban regime in Afghanistan, have all contributed to the increased Shi'i presence in the USA. Thus, like the Sunnis, the Shi'i community in America now comprises a variety of people from many nations who represent diverse linguistic, national, ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The arrival of newer migrants has impinged on the American Shi'i community. Newer immigrants tend to revive traditional norms and impose a conservative and extraneous expression of Islam. Immigrants also emphasize the public demonstration of Islam, the segregation of the sexes, and a general disdain of American culture and norms. Shi'i immigrants also exhibit a general aversion to music and insist on a replication of rituals and mosque services that have often been imported from abroad. As Lynda Walbridge states: "...today's children hear the names of the imams repeatedly invoked, see increasing numbers of shrouded women, witness men beating their chests in a display of remorse and anger....thanks to these immigrants and the sheiks who have been brought to this country to teach them, America is not going to be the place where the imams are forgotten."⁸

Besides the immigrants, the Shi'i community in America is also composed of an increasing number of African Americans converts. In the twentieth century, the charismatic leaders of the African American movements appropriated elements of Sunni rather than Shi'i Islam in their teachings. This was, in all probability, because, in the early 1920s and 1930s, Shi'ism did not have a visible presence in the American public sphere. In fact, most black leaders were not aware of the nuances that differentiate Sunni from Shi'i Islam. Even when they abandoned their indigenous movements, black leaders turned their followers to Sunni rather than Shi'i Islam, especially as some, such as imam Warith al-Din Muhammad, were supported by Saudi Arabia.⁹ Iran, which has the highest Shi'i population in the world, remained largely indifferent to the plight of Blacks in America even though, in the 1970s, it enjoyed very close relations with the American government. Consequently, Shi'ism remained, for many Black Americans, an alien religion until the 1980s.

It was in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979 that the African American community started looking at Shi'ism as a possible expression of normative Islam. Before that time, there were hardly any Black Shi'is. It is estimated that by 1982, due to the influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran, 1,000 blacks converted to Shi'ism in the Philadelphia area alone.¹⁰

In addition to the African American Shi'is, Sufi groups with Shi'i proclivities have also been established in America. Most of the movements are established within the Iranian community. Many Iranians prefer the esoteric dimension to the rigid and more strict Iranian mosques, some of which subscribe to the ideology of the Iranian regime or have a legalistic interpretation of Shi'i Islam. There are at least three Shi'i Sufi organizations within the Iranian community in California.¹¹ A discussion of the origins and activities of these groups is beyond the purview of this paper.

⁸Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit MI 1997) 205.

⁹On the close relationship between Warith al-Din and Saudi Arabia, see Robert Dannin, 'Understanding the Multi-Ethnic Dilemma' in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito (eds), *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (Scholars Press, Atlanta GA 1998) 333; also 356 n. 9.

¹⁰Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, op. cit. 133.

¹¹See details in Ron Kelley, 'Muslims in Los Angeles in Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (eds), *Muslim Communities in North America* (State University of New York, Albany 1994) 160–161.

Shi'i centers in America

The proliferation of diverse Shi'i migrants to America necessitated the establishment of centers and places of worship to furnish the religious needs of the community. The first Shi'i center of worship was established in Michigan City in 1924. According to a booklet published by the Islamic Center of Michigan City, the center was first organized on April 26, 1914 under the name of "The Bader Elmoneer Society of Michigan City, Indiana."¹² In the early 1920s, the Society purchased land across from the existing Michigan City Police Station and erected a building that was to become the first Shi'i mosque built in America. On May 10, 1924, under the name of the Asser El Jadeed (the new generation) Arabian Islamic Society, the organization reorganized itself as a non-profit religious entity.

The Shi'is in Detroit also built a center in 1963 to cater for the increasing number of Shi'is, the majority of whom came from Lebanon. Sensing the needs of the Shi'i community in America, the most prominent Shi'i spiritual leader of the time, Ayatullah al-Khu'i (d. 1992) sent an emissary to establish a center in America in 1976. This marked the beginning of an epoch in which the Shi'i religious leadership would be actively engaged in furnishing religious guidance to its followers in the West. Gradually, the Shi'i community became engaged in providing religious centers and facilitating infrastructures that would protect and perpetuate the identity of its members. There are currently about two hundred Shi'i centers in North America.

A survey that I conducted in 1996 indicates that the mean years of existence of Shi'i institutions in North America is 10.28 years. This indicates that the Shi'i community in North America is a relatively nascent community. The survey further suggests that most institutions have limited financial resources as most members attempt to establish themselves financially. In response to a question, a center stated: "Until recently, we had only 10–15 families from India and Pakistan. In the last 3–4 years many families arrived from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. Many are students from Iran and others are refugees from Iraq. Most of the population is young and struggling economically." In contrast to this, a recent report published by the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) indicates that the founding year of Sunni mosques ranges from 1925 to 2000. Two percent were founded prior to 1950. Half the mosques surveyed were founded by 1980 and the other half were founded after that. The vast majority of existing mosques (87%) have been established since 1970.¹³ Since they were established earlier, mosques built by Sunnis tend to have more resources and experience in catering to the increasing needs of the community.

A notable feature of American Shi'i institutions is that some communities are building community centers rather than traditional places of worship. This is done with the explicit aim of incorporating recreational centers to attract the younger generation in their activities. My survey indicates that most institutions view the establishment of youth programs to be among their most urgent needs.¹⁴ Seventy percent of the institutions surveyed said they

¹²I am grateful to Ron Amen of the Arab American Museum in Detroit for making a copy of the booklet available to me.

¹³See Council on American-Islamic Relations, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait* (www.cair.com/Portals/0/pdf/The_Mosque_in_America_A_National_Portrait.pdf) (accessed September 28, 2008) 3, 24.

¹⁴An important study on the subject is a survey on the Shi'a youth carried out in Toronto. The book marks an important milestone in understanding the youth predicament in North America. See Sadik Alloo (ed.), *Muslim Youth at the Crossroads: Advancing into the Twenty First Century* (Hyderi Press, Toronto 1995).

planned to organize events that would attract the younger generation within the community. However, many seem perplexed as to how to attract the youth to the centers. A remark in one of the responses is worth noting: “Muslim youth are more attracted by American rather than traditional Muslim events. Thus, they are more likely to be attracted to retreats, recreational camps, picnics and debates than sermons and prayers.”

The Shi‘i populace in America

Scholars have differed as to how many Muslims there are in America. A conservative figure would be around seven million. One attempt to categorize and count Muslim Americans put African Americans at 42%, South Asians at 24.4%, Arabs at 12.4%, Africans at 6.2%, Iranians at 3.6%, South-east Asians at 2%, European Americans at 1.6%, and “others” at 5.4%.¹⁵ It is estimated that 20% of the Muslim population live in California and 16% in New York.¹⁶

Similarly, there is no reliable estimate as to the numbers of Shi‘is in America. This is because the American census does not ask for the religious affiliation of the population. As mentioned earlier, it is estimated that the Twelver Shi‘is, together with the Ismai‘lis, form about a fifth of the American Muslim community. The Shi‘i population is growing rapidly in Canada too. In the last quarter of a century, the number of Canadian Shi‘is increased five-fold to 132,000 in 1996, the fastest growth any religion has experienced in Canada.¹⁷ It is estimated that during the same period (1971–1996), the total Muslim population in Canada increased from 93,000 to about 450,000.

Gottesman’s contention that there are no more than 300,000 Shi‘is in North America is palpably outdated.¹⁸ Ilyas Ba-Yunus and Kassim Kone estimate that there are 786,000 Shi‘is in America, a figure that appears to be exceptionally low¹⁹ especially as thousands of Shi‘is have migrated from a wide array of places since the 1970s. M’roueh, on the other hand, claims that of the 9.6 million Muslims in America in 1995, two million were Shi‘is. He further maintains that there are 256 Shi‘i mosques in America, a figure that appears exaggerated.²⁰ Yasin al-Jibouri’s estimate that the Shi‘i community in the USA forms about 15%–20% of the total population of seven million Muslims in America appears more tenable.²¹ In the absence of accurate statistical data, however, it is impossible to verify the figures cited.

The relaxation of immigration laws in the 1960s meant that an increasing number of Iranian, Iraqi, Lebanese and South Asian Shi‘is arrived on American shores. Hence, it is

¹⁵Karen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* (Russell Sage, New York 2003) 4.

¹⁶Ibid. 52.

¹⁷Ghulam Abbas Sajan, ‘The Status of the Ahlul Bayt’s Devotees in Canada’ in *Ahlul Bayt Assembly of North America: Abstract of Proceedings of 1996* (International Graphics, Beltsville MD 1997) 95.

¹⁸Poston, op. cit. 30.

¹⁹Ilyas Ba-Yunus and Kassim Kone, ‘Muslim Americans: A Demographic Report’ in Z. Bukhari and others (eds), *Muslims’ Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears, and Aspirations* (AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek CA 2004) 320.

²⁰Youssef M’roueh, ‘Shi‘a Population in North America’ in *Ahlul Bayt Assembly of North America*, op. cit. 57. The author does not cite the source of his figures.

²¹Al-Jibouri, ‘A Glance at Shi‘a Communities in the US’ in *Islamic Affairs, Virginia* (1993): 1. See also Smith, op. cit. 61.

reasonable to estimate that today Shi'is make up at least 20% of the total Muslim population of America. The following section, will briefly examine the main Shi'i groups, their origins, and settlement in America in more depth.

The phenomenon of 'imported Islam': the Iraqi Shi'is in America

The Iraqi Shi'is initially came to the USA as students but many chose not to return home due to the adverse political conditions in Iraq. Other Iraqis sought asylum in America in the 1970s after the establishment of Saddam Hussein's regime. Dispersed in different parts of the country, these Iraqis are well educated, highly skilled and quite affluent, having established businesses or secured well-paid employment. Most of the Iraqis come from Baghdad, Najaf, Kerbala or Basra.

In contrast to these Iraqis are a myriad of refugees who either escaped from Iraq or were captured by the allied forces during the Gulf War. Having been imprisoned in camps in Saudi Arabia, many Iraqis sought and were granted asylum in the USA. They have settled in different parts of America ranging from New York, Detroit, Chicago and Denver, to Nashville and Los Angeles.

In contrast to the Iraqis who migrated in the 1970s and 1980s, most of these recent arrivals from Iraq form an unskilled labor force with little knowledge of English. Consequently, many tend to work in factories and perform other manual jobs. The recently arrived Iraqi refugees renew ties with the homeland, importing, in the process, their own distinctive cultural accretions. Having lived in the Shi'i "holy places" (*atabāt*), such as Najaf and Kerbala, where the Shi'i leadership (*marāji'*)²² reside, Iraqi Shi'is bring with them a deep sense of religious commitment and the desire to replicate religious services in America. Their religious fervor is not always shared by those Iraqis who migrated to America earlier.

Since they have migrated here recently, the Iraqis have not established their own religious institutions. Thus they have had to share centers with the Lebanese and Iranian communities, leading to many altercations between the different groups.²³ In one city, for example, Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is established a place of worship. However, disputes soon arose on issues such as the use of the vernacular in the sermons, the types of food to be served, performance of rituals and other internal disputes. In Dearborn, to cater specifically for the growing Iraqi community, a separate Iraqi center, appropriately called the Kerbala Center, was established after the end of the Gulf War.

Given their strong religious and social background, the Iraqis have not assimilated to American culture to the degree that other Shi'is have. Iraqi Shi'is visit the Islamic centers regularly and establish strong bonds with the representatives of the Shi'i religious authorities, the *marāji'*.

In addition, Iraqis benefit from the services of the *khutabā'*. These are often itinerant preachers who inculcate Islamic values by encouraging public demonstration of Islamic piety. The *khutabā'* have the largest audience in the months of Ramadhan and Muharram. It was in Muharram that Husayn b. 'Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, was killed in Kerbala,

²²A *marji'* (sing. of *marāji'*) 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 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.

²³Walbridge reports a more intense and dramatic atmosphere during the 'Ashura commemorations after the arrival of Iraqis. Walbridge, op. cit. 211-213.

Iraq. The month is marked by Shi'is in America with lectures, lamentations and public display of grief. It is in this month that the *khutabā'* have the most impact on the Shi'i community. They have been specifically trained to recite eulogies of the Imams, recounting, in the process, their sufferings and persecution through history and evoking the feelings of their audience by delivering emotionally charged sermons. Iraqi *khutabā'* narrate stories about the Imams and deliver the message of the *marāji'* to their followers. They also recount the horrors endured by the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein. The exposition of highly polemicized and politicized discourses and repeated affirmation of the historical injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet helps mediate Shi'i Islam to the Iraqi community in America. These lectures further seek to vindicate the verity and preponderance of Shi'i beliefs and liturgical practices.

Ironically, the *khutabā'* tend to amplify the ethnic division in the services they render. Since they are not acquainted with American socio-political issues and do not comprehend the challenges that Muslim youth encounter in America, the *khutabā'*'s discourses, delivered in Arabic, are often confined to issues that are germane to the elder generation within their particular ethnic community creating, in the process, an obstacle to the allegiance to universal Islam and further alienating the youth from the centers.

Assimilation, isolation, or insulation: the Iranian Shi'i community

The Iranians form the largest Shi'i group in America. Some estimates place the population of the Iranian community at close to a million, a number that is increasing annually.²⁴ The number of Iranians migrating to America has increased dramatically during the last three decades. In fact, Iranians account for 52% of Mid-Eastern Muslim immigrants in America. Another notable fact is that a fourth of all Muslim immigrants from around the world are Iranians, outnumbering immigrants from all other Muslim-populated countries.²⁵ Most of these Iranians came to America after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and settled in California which, it is estimated, has a population of about 400,000 Iranians.²⁶ Of these, it is estimated that approximately 45,000–60,000 live in San Diego alone.²⁷

The Iranian Shi'i community in America can be divided into three distinct groups. The first group comprises Iranian professionals, many of whom left their native land fearing the policies of and reprisals from the new regime after the revolution in 1979. Having been influenced by the Shah's white revolution and "modernization" policies that introduced a Western life style, alcohol, and drugs into Iran, many of these Iranians adopted a secular outlook and were estranged from Islam. It is not an exaggeration to state that among the various American Shi'i communities, the Iranians constitute the most alienated group and have assimilated themselves most to American culture.

Assimilation occurs when a cultural or ethnic group consciously changes its identity to accord with another group, recognizing the latter's cultural superiority, so that the merged group may advance socially or politically by partially or totally giving up its original ethnic and racial identity. Assimilation may lead to changes in one's religious and cultural outlook

²⁴Jane Smith, op. cit. 53.

²⁵Carol Stone, 'Estimate of Muslims Living in America' in Haddad, op. cit. 33.

²⁶Frederick Denny, 'Church/Sect Theory and Emerging North American Muslim Communities: Issues and Trends' in Earle Waugh and Frederick Denny (eds), *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman* (Scholars Press, Atlanta GA 1998) 235.

²⁷M.K. Hermansen, 'The Muslims of San Diego' in Haddad and Smith, *Muslim Communities*, op. cit. 187. It should be noted that not all Iranians are Muslims. The figures quoted include members from the Bahai, Jewish and Christian Armenian communities.

or even disintegration of one's own identity. It further leads to the absorption into a culturally homogeneous society. This blending into a foreign culture is often at the cost of Islamic identity. Those who favor assimilation try to distance themselves from elements of their own identity that would differentiate them from mainstream American society. For them, commitment to living in the USA also means a commitment to full integration in American society.

The effects of assimilation and merger into an American culture are evinced from the changing of names and de-emphasizing of customs that would set people apart from others. Anglicization of names is a common phenomenon among new migrants who want to integrate themselves to the mainstream society. This is because it is an important survival mechanism that helps alleviate racial or cultural prejudices. In addition, anglicization is an important factor in the process of assimilation. Thus, for many Iranians, a person by the name of Rawshan, for example, is often called "Ron" and Khurshid "Kate".

In contrast to the Iraqis described above, most of the assimilated Iranians have minimal contact with the religion of their home country, attending mosques only when a close family member or friend dies. In a survey conducted by George Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, 54.7% of Iranians surveyed said they did not observe religious practices and 48.2% of their spouses also affirmed that they did not observe Islam even when they lived in Iran.²⁸ In fact, many young Iranians have become so influenced by the West that they openly consume alcohol and pork and eschew all affiliations with the religious community. For many of these secular Iranians, Iranian culture is their primary source of definition and identity. Cultural identity, for them, is preponderant over their identity as Muslims.

For the secular Iranians, Islam with its dietary and other restrictions is seen as an impediment to full integration into American society. In the survey conducted by George Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr cited above, only 4.3% of respondents and 9.0% of their spouses said they always or often observed their religious practices in America²⁹ and only 3% were involved in a religious organization.³⁰

In contrast to the above group are other Iranians who also came to America after the revolution but who fully support the revolution and share its ideals. Many of them are students at various universities who promote and filter the ideology of the current Iranian regimes into Islamic centers. Much hostility is evident between the diverse Iranian groups as anger is directed at those who propagate Iranian ideology. Due to their pro-government political stance, the Hizbollahi Iranians (as they are often called) are alienated not only from the wider American society but are also estranged from their own community, the majority of which is secularized.

Incidents between pro-Khumayni and secularized Iranians have become a common feature since the revolution. An Iranian woman was harassed by Iranian supporters of the Shah for wearing the hijab. They viewed the hijab as not only a religious statement but also as a pro-Khumayni political statement.³¹

Iranian influence is also exerted through the Iranian-backed Muslim Student Organization Persian-Speaking Group (MSA-PSG). This is an organization of predominantly Iranian

²⁸George Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, 'Secular Immigrants: Religiosity and Ethnicity Among Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles' in Haddad and Smith, *Muslim Communities*, op. cit. 451.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid. 453.

³¹Kelley, op. cit. 148–149. For other instances of clashes among Iranian groups, see Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles* (Greenwood Press, Westport CT 1997) 98.

students and ex-students who were a part of the Muslim student Association (MSA) in the 1970s. With increased tension between Sunnis and Shi'as, members of the MSA-PSG formed a separate group. MSA-PSG holds gatherings at various college and university campuses and sometimes in the houses of individual members.

An Iranian presence is also evident in the mosques and Islamic centers. The Alawi foundation, based in New York, has helped establish Shi'i religious centers in various parts of America. Although the centers do not outwardly express their Iranian proclivity, Iranian ideologies are filtered through the sermons delivered and icons that are displayed. The imposition of Iranian ideologies in some centers has met with stiff opposition. Some Iranian Imams have claimed complete control over the centers, maintaining that, on the basis of Khomeini's concept of the comprehensive authority of the jurist (*wilāyat al-faqīh*), they have the right to run the centers in accordance with Islamic dictates. Iraqi, South Asian and Khoja Shi'is resent and oppose what they perceive as the manipulation of religious beliefs to gain control of Islamic centers. The altercations have, at times, engendered power struggles and bitter disputes in many centers, causing major rifts within the Shi'i community. Due to linguistic differences, Shi'is from different ethnic background hardly visit Iranian centers. Moreover, non-Iranian Shi'is are often apolitical and do not approve of the highly politicized nature of the sermons delivered or of the imposition of the concept of *wilāyat al-faqīh*.

The third group of Iranians comprises those immigrants who are alarmed at the dissolution of religious values, especially among their younger generation but who are not affiliated to the regime in Iran. To imbue their youth with religious instruction, they organize events such as Sunday classes, weekly lectures and monthly Qur'anic classes in their houses. An example of such an organization is the Islamic center of Beverly Hills. The organization's views differ radically from those propagated by the government in Iran and the MSA-PSG. In their gatherings, Khomeini and Iran are rarely mentioned and the Islamic dress code is not strictly enforced.³²

Since they prefer to distance themselves from Iranian politics, these Iranians do not, generally speaking, directly ally themselves with the various Iranian centers described above, choosing instead to join Shi'is from other parts of the world, such as the Khoja or Pakistani Shi'is, to commemorate Shi'i religious holidays.

The foregoing indicates how Iranian politics are being played out on American soil. Those supporting the regime tend to be highly critical of the American lifestyle and politics, whereas those who are against the regime assimilate themselves completely into American culture. This has generated frequent antagonism between the two groups. Apart from the third group described above, the Iranians are often estranged from other Shi'i Muslims in America.

Transmission of a distinctive American culture: the Lebanese Shi'is

Among the early migrants from Lebanon were Shi'is who settled in Michigan in the 1880s. It is quite certain that by the beginning of the last century there was a small Shi'i community living in Michigan. Thereafter, many migrants from Arab countries settled in Detroit between 1918 and 1922.³³ Mariam 'Uthman, who came to Dearborn, Michigan, in 1949, remembers that there was a steady influx of her Lebanese neighbors and friends after she and her family migrated to Dearborn.³⁴ Today, Dearborn has one of the highest Shi'i population in North America, about 35,000–40,000 mainly Lebanese migrants.

³²GhaneaBassiri, op. cit. 33.

³³Walbridge, op. cit. 17.

³⁴Interview with Mariam 'Uthman recorded in December 1996.

A survey conducted by Haddad and Adair shows that almost all of the first-, second-, and third-generation Muslims were of Lebanese ancestry. This substantiates the view that the Lebanese were among the first immigrants to settle in America in substantial numbers.³⁵ Over a period of time, almost entire Lebanese villages were transplanted to the Detroit area. However, not all Lebanese in Detroit are descendants of early immigrants. Between 1983 and 1990, soon after the Lebanese civil war ended, over 30,000 immigrants came to Detroit directly from Lebanon.³⁶

Like other Muslims residing in America at that time, the early Lebanese immigrants, “seemed content, or at least constrained, to keep Islam within the parameters of their ethnic associations.”³⁷ The early Lebanese found no large Muslim community present. They were quite liberal in their lifestyles and often assimilated themselves to the American way of life. This point is corroborated by a survey conducted by Haddad and Lummis, which indicates that Americans born of Lebanese parents tend to be among the most liberal Muslims in America.³⁸ Their survey also found that Midwest Muslims, a large portion of whom are Lebanese, are most liberal in their interpretation of Islam, especially when it comes to the question of women’s clothing. They are also less likely to participate in regular Islamic obligations such as prayers and fasting.³⁹

Compared with the other Shi’i groups, the challenges confronting the Lebanese community are quite different. Since many of the Lebanese are third- or fourth-generation migrants, transmission of Islam to future generation has already appropriated a distinctive American culture. Many Lebanese centers have thus devised novel ways to attract the youth back to the mosques. Women play a greater role in religious services and there is less emphasis on gender segregation in some centers in Dearborn.

Although the Lebanese and Iraqis share the same language, they are culturally dissimilar. The Lebanese tend to adopt a less rigorous approach to legalistic Islam. More than one Imam has told me that this is due to the fact that the Lebanese have been more exposed to a Western lifestyle and because they originate from a more pluralistic background. For example, during their weddings, the Lebanese tend to have mixed-gendered gatherings accompanied with music. The Iraqis, on the other hand, abstain from entertainment that involves music and enforce strict gender segregation.

Recreating Kerbala: the South Asian Shi’is

The South Asian Muslim community in America is composed of migrants from Pakistan, India and a lesser number from Bangladesh. South Asian Muslims originally migrated from the Punjab in the late nineteenth century. In fact, Muslims from India are known to have migrated to California in 1912.⁴⁰

Stories of their successes and the distinct possibilities of employment opportunities encouraged other Muslims from the same area to migrate. The enlargement of the South Asian Muslim community spanned several decades, increasing especially after World War

³⁵Haddad and Lummis, op. cit. 15.

³⁶Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock, ‘Cracking Down on Diaspora: Arab Detroit and America’s War on Terror’ (2003) 76 (3) *Anthropological Quarterly* 446.

³⁷C. Eric Lincoln, ‘The American Muslim Mission in the Context of American Social History’ in Earle Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban and Regula Qureshi (eds), *The Muslim Community in North America* (University of Alberta Press, Edmonton 1987) 219.

³⁸Haddad and Lummis, op. cit. 171.

³⁹Ibid. 134.

⁴⁰Hermansen, op. cit. 171.

II when the American government sponsored students from different parts of the world, as immigrants came seeking better education and economic empowerment.⁴¹ Currently, almost 6,000 Pakistani Muslims come to the USA annually.⁴²

A greater number of South Asian immigrants started arriving only after 1965. These immigrants benefited from the relaxation of American immigration laws at this time, for it meant that students who had settled here could sponsor family members to join them. Many South Asian students entered the United States under US scholarship programs and then decided to remain in America. Among the South Asian migrants were Shi'is who, like the Sunnis, decided to take advantage of the favorable immigration laws by settling in the US. The majority of these Shi'is have migrated since the 1970s.

Immigration statistics and the census further corroborate the point. They show a sharp increase in the numbers immigrating from India and Pakistan in the late 1960s, from Bangladesh after 1971 (after it split off from West Pakistan), and from Afghanistan after the Soviets invaded in 1979.⁴³ In fact, immigration of Pakistanis is reported to have increased nine-fold since 1968.⁴⁴ Other statistics indicate that the South Asian community increased dramatically between 1970–1971 and 1990.⁴⁵

South Asian Shi'is in America are concentrated in major cities such as Chicago, Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles. A notable feature is that, compared with other American Shi'i groups, they experience Islam mainly through the phenomenon of "imported Islam" and are highly resistant to change. In addition, in their centers, Islam is mediated in a culturally conditioned form. Instead of conducting services animated exclusively by Islamic provenance, ethnic and cultural factors have become more pronounced. This observation is corroborated by the survey of Haddad and Lummis, which indicates that Pakistani Muslims tend to experience Islam through rituals more than other ethnic groups.⁴⁶

Although prayers and other traditional religious services are held to be important, ritualized services in Muharram, lectures, and the symbolic representation of Kerbala are often held in higher esteem within the South Asian Shi'i community. Many South Asian Shi'is, for example, only visit their centers during the month of Muharram. Most of the services and liturgies are conducted in Urdu in highly ritualized forms resonating with the services in their countries of origins. South Asian Shi'is also perpetuate the traditional Muharram rituals such as acts of public flagellation and inflicting wounds on their bodies. Very few centers organize programs that are oriented toward the youth or that reach out to other communities. Few South Asian centers encourage an active civic role for their members.

A single thread that links the diverse Shi'i groups to the larger tapestry of Shi'is coming to America is their love for the family of the Prophet and the performance of Muharram rituals. These rituals are marked annually in the *Husayniyyas*.⁴⁷ The *Husayniyyas* have become important vehicles for importing and then sustaining extraneous cultures. By facilitating the performance of rituals endemic to a particular ethnic group the *Husayniyyas* tend to strengthen and amplify religious values. Thus, American Shi'is express their Islamic praxis

⁴¹Sulayman Nyang, *Islam in the United States* (Kazi, Chicago IL 1999) 40.

⁴²Stone, op. cit. 32.

⁴³Leonard, op. cit. 13.

⁴⁴Stone, op. cit. 32.

⁴⁵Garbi Schmidt, *Sunni Muslims in Chicago: Islam in Urban America* (Temple, Philadelphia PA 2004) 3.

⁴⁶Haddad and Lummis, op. cit. 30.

⁴⁷*Ḥusayniyya* refers to a place where Shi'is congregate to commemorate the deaths and birthdays of the Imams. It is distinguished from a mosque in that rules governing ritual purity in mosques are not applied there.

in a form that is often culturally conditioned to the new environment. Since the rituals are experienced differently by the various religious groups, they tend to accentuate ethnic disparities. South Asian Shi'is, for example, commemorate events like the death of al-Husayn b. 'Ali differently from the way Iraqi or Iranian Shi'is do. Shi'is from the Indian sub-continent and East Africa re-enact the events in Kerbala with their own culturally generated symbols and modes of expressions. They insist on having replicas of Kerbala in their centers. These include a *dharīh* room which contains a depiction of the horse of al-Husayn and his sword. Included among the replicas are the symbolic representation of the flag of 'Abbas⁴⁸ in the form of a palm, a cradle that symbolizes al-Husayn's six-month-old child, who was also killed in Kerbala, and other traditional replicas of shrines. These symbols draw one's attention to God, the Prophet and his family and evoke the central paradigm of Shi'i piety – allegiance to the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*.

In contrast, Lebanese, Iranian and Iraqi centers exhibit a general disdain for such symbolic representations of Kerbala. Acts of reverence and devotion toward these symbols are perceived by Shi'is from other ethnic background as subtle forms of *shirk* (polytheism). In more than one American multi-ethnic center, there was a major dispute between Lebanese and South Asian Shi'is as to whether it was permissible to kiss and venerate the 'flag' (*'alam*) of 'Abbas. Such cultural differences have engendered much tension between the diverse ethnic groups, leading to the fragmentation of the Shi'i community.

It is to be remembered that the Muharram rituals are intrinsic to Shi'i piety and expression of love for the family of the Prophet. However, these very rituals have become a catalyst for generating differences within the American Shi'i community. The symbolic representations described above are absent in Iranian and Arab centers, which instead display slogans and the texts of certain utterances of al-Husayn. Frequently, these slogans are aimed at evoking the political consciousness of the Shi'is. As Schubel states, "While all Shi'a may agree that allegiance to the *ahl al-bayt* is crucial, there is a great deal of disagreement over precisely how to manifest that allegiance. While the virtues of the Karbala martyrs – courage, self-sacrifice, piety, devotion – are agreed upon, the proper means of articulating them are more controversial."⁴⁹ Shi'ism in America manifests diversity within an overarching unity, a diversity that is reflected in the ethnic variances within the Shi'i institutions. It is the Muharram rituals that give American Islam a distinctly Shi'i coloring, for they differentiate Shi'is from Sunnis and all other Muslim sects. Paradoxically, the very institution that is supposed to unite Shi'i Muslims (the mosque and the rituals) becomes a catalyst for the perpetuation of a distinctive ethnic ethos.

Traditional South Asian culture is also accentuated by the phenomenon of "imported Islam." Like the Iraqis, South Asian Shi'is tend to import imams and *khutabā'* from their homeland. The Indo-Pakistani *khutabā'* regularly engage in anti-Sunni polemics in emotionally charged lectures delivered in the month of Muharram. Although this genre of preachers is able to cater to the immigrant adult population by appealing to their emotions

⁴⁸'Abbas, the half brother of al-Husayn, carried the flag in Kerbala and was killed in battle. Because of his faithfulness and loyalty, he is depicted in heroic terms in Shi'i hagiographic literature. See also the description of the *dharīh* room in Vernon Schubel, 'Karbala as Sacred Space among North American Shi'a' in Barbara Metcalf (ed), *Making Muslim space in North America and Europe* (University of California Press, Berkeley 1996) 191.

⁴⁹Vernon Schubel, 'The Muharram Majlis: The Role of a Ritual in the Preservation of Shi'a Identity' in E. Waugh, S.M. Abu-Laban and R Qureshi (eds), *Muslim Families in North America* (University of Alberta Press, Edmonton 1991) 128.

and reinforcing long held views on history, it has alienated the younger generation and others within the South Asian community who view such topics as irrelevant to their present needs in America. It is not an exaggeration to state that the South Asian Shi‘i community seems to be the most resistant to initiate any transformation in their centers, resulting in many youth being alienated from the community.

In contrast to the Lebanese centers described above, the extraneous culture imported by South Asian parents demands that women be partitioned off in a separate room, where they can neither interact with a speaker nor contribute to the proceedings. Most South Asian centers do not have a ladies committee, or, if they do, they are not represented on the boards or executive councils. The participation of women is, generally speaking, limited to catering for meals when events are held. Traditional South Asian culture enforces strict gender segregation and demands minimal female contribution. Furthermore, women are not able to exercise voting powers in most South Asian centers. As a respondent said in my survey: “Our women can elect the President of the United States but they cannot elect the President of the local Islamic center.” In contrast, in the Lebanese and Khoja centers, women play more prominent roles.

Multiplicity of complex identities: the Khoja Shi‘is

Among Western scholarship, little is known of the provenance and activities of the Khoja Shi‘i Muslims. Hence a brief purview of their background is necessary. Khojas trace their ancestry to India, more specifically to Sind, Punjab, Gujarat and Cutch, where their ancestors were converted to Islam in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The term “Khoja” is derived from an Indian caste consisting mostly of Isma‘ili and Sunni Muslims. The term is also applicable to the Twelver Shi‘is, who split off from the main Isma‘ili community in India in the late nineteenth century.

Pir Sadr al-Din (d. 1369 or 1416) was an Isma‘ili *dā‘ī* (proselytizer) who is credited with the mass conversion of the Khojas from the Lohanas, a Hindu caste. He is also said to have named them Khojas, a derivation from the Persian *khwaja*, an honorific appellation referring to a master or prominent person. Pir Sadr al-Din, is also said to have also laid the basis for the communal organization of the Khojas by building the first three *jamaat khanas* (assembly or prayer halls) and appointing their *Mukhis* (leaders).⁵⁰

An important figure in the conversion to and dissemination of Twelver Shi‘i teachings was Haji Gulamali Isma‘il, popularly known as Haji Naji. He is credited with translating Arabic and Persian religious texts into Gujarati, a language spoken by most Khoja Shi‘is of the time. Many of these texts articulated Shi‘i beliefs and practices. In the early 1900s some Khojas went to visit the holy sites in Iraq. In Najaf they met a prominent scholar of the time, Shaykh Zayn al-‘Abidin Mazandarani. During their discussions with the Shaykh, the Khoja Shi‘is expressed the need for a teacher to visit India to teach the basics of Islam. At the request of Shaykh Mazandarani, Mulla Qadir Hussein arrived in India and taught some Khoja families the principles of Twelver Shi‘i faith.

The Khojas were actively engaged in commercial activity between India and East Africa since the seventeenth century. Arriving from Gujarat province in West India, they settled initially in large numbers on the island of Zanzibar. Later, some migrants settled on mainland East Africa, especially after the Umani Sultan, Sayyid Sa‘id, transferred his capital to Zanzibar in 1840. Soon, these Indian Asians enjoyed economic and social supremacy. They

⁵⁰Wilferd Madelung, ‘Khodjas’ in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2).

dominated commerce, trade, the civil service and construction. Economic stratification was entrenched with racial segregation, engendering race-based hierarchy. An indigenous revolution in Zanzibar in 1964 and the subsequent merger with mainland Tanganyika led to the formation of the republic of Tanzania. The race-based hierarchy was attacked by Africans, who condemned the Asians for their social and economic exclusivity.

From a few families living in India and Africa, the community has now grown to well over 100,000 Khojas worldwide. During the 1950s, the Khoja community in America was comprised mainly of a few students who lived in isolated areas where there was no sizeable Muslim community. Hence, it is difficult to speak of a distinct Khoja presence in America before the 1960s. The majority of the Khojas migrated to the West in 1972–1973. This was a result of the East African governments' policies that favored Africans in the social, economic, and educational spheres, including measures to nationalize Asian-owned enterprises and buildings and to favour better education for Africans, often at the expense of the Indian community. Increased emigration by the Khoja community was also precipitated by the revolution in Zanzibar in 1964 and the expulsion of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin in 1972. Shi'i Khojas from Tanzania and Kenya also migrated in response to the inimical socio-political conditions in their homeland countries.

Khojas have a multiplicity of complex identities. Since the Khojas migrated from East Africa, they have brought with them some African culture. Khojas coming from Tanzania, for example, often communicate with each other in their native language, Kiswahili. Yet due to their Indian origins, they also speak Urdu or Gujarati and have appropriated the culture and values of the South Asian community. Living in America has also seen them adopt elements of American identity and culture. Their South Asian culture is seen from the fact that their centers are structured along the same lines as the Pakistani and Indian mosques. They contain *dharikh* rooms and other icons that depict the episode of Kerbala.

In trying to accommodate traditional Islamic values and changing situations within the wider cultural context of American society, the Khojas have instituted certain reforms to meet the needs of contemporary times. The youth reject what is posited as "normative Islam" imposed by the adult immigrant community. They are more concerned to differentiate between culture and religion, leading to a paradigm shift from an old, culturally imposed mentality to a distinctly American mindset.

To accommodate the needs of the youth, most sermons in the Khoja community are now delivered in English instead of the traditional Urdu language. The Khojas have also trained some indigenous Khoja scholars who have replaced the "imported" imams. Instead of flagellating themselves with iron chains on the day of 'Ashura, many members of the Khoja community donate blood to the Red Cross in the name of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Other transformations include the establishment of community centers that provide recreational facilities, instead of mosques. They have also updated the Sunday school curriculum to reflect the needs of the younger generation in a pluralistic milieu. Compared with many other Shi'i communities, Khoja women tend to play a greater role in their mosques; they are well represented on the executive committees and organize events for women. In 2000, a woman was elected President of the North American Shi'a Ithna-asheri Communities (NASIMCO).

The Khojas are known for their sense of discipline and organization. In 1976, they established a world body called the World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna'asheri Jamaat in England. With the help of this world body, they have established numerous centers of worship throughout America. The Federation's stated aim is to act as an umbrella organization, catering to the needs of the world Khoja community. The largest Khoja community in North America is in Toronto, while the biggest Khoja congregation in America is in New York.

Conclusion

The American Shi'ī community is reconstituted in a different environment in which the Shi'īs form a conglomerate of disparate ethnic groups. This confluence of Shi'īs sharing common space has proved to be problematic. The Shi'īs face the challenge to reconstitute themselves into more Islamic and less ethnically stylized institutions. The Shi'īs also need to foster interethnic social interaction and more pluralistic centers anchored on bonds of faith that would transcend other differences.

The Shi'īs are also confronted with other dividing lines within the community. This article has focused on the ethnic divisions within the community. However, other demarcating lines are becoming increasingly apparent. Different circles are drawn on the basis of interpretation of Islamic law, openness to American society, and nationalistic fervor. Other dividing lines include tensions between conservatism and modernism, the dichotomy between preservation and reformation, and the discourse on gender segregation in the community. There is a need for engagement in both external and internal pluralism within the American Shi'ī community.

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