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Conversion & Conflict

Muslims in Mexico

NATASCHA GARVIN

Religious pluralism in Latin America has grown steadily since the second half of the twentieth century. Embedded in a broad spectrum of syncretistic Catholicism which incorporated various Amerindian beliefs and practices, communities first began to join the movement for liberation theology. The second and more diverse trend has been to move away from Catholicism altogether and join a variety of Protestant denominations. In Mexico, and especially in Chiapas, a new facet of religious pluralism is emerging: the spread of Islam.¹

Muslims in Mexico

Although the Muslim community in Mexico is quite small (about 1,000 members which means about 0,001% of the 97,5 million inhabitants of the country), the panorama is already showing considerable diversity: There are roughly equal numbers of Muslims of foreign origin (mainly Lebanese and Syrian) and Mexican converts. Centro Cultural Islámico de México (CCIM), a Sunni organization headed by Omar Weston, a British convert to Islam, is active in several big cities of northern and central Mexico. It has established a da'wa (call for conversion) centre near Mexico City with the aim of offering a place for recreation, prayer and learning. Shi'a Muslims, for their part, number only a few dozen and most of them are diplomats from Lebanon, Syria and Iran. Apart from the CCIM there is a Sufi order called Nur Ashki Jerrahi in Mexico City which is headed by two women, Shaykha Fariha and Shaykha Amina, whose beliefs and practices are considered by many to be a fairly unorthodox mixture of Islamic and New Age-like mysticism and feminism. A second and larger community of Sufis founded by

Conversion to Islam has been taking place in the conflict-ridden Mexican state of Chiapas for about ten years. Islam was introduced to the local indigenous population by members of the transnational Murabitun movement who founded a commune in the town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, governed by its own rules and protected strictly against outsiders.

Mohammed Nafia, a Spanish convert from Granada, exists in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas). This community is attached to the transnational Murabitun Movement which consists almost exclusively of recent converts, mostly from European backgrounds.

The Murabitun movement

The Murabitun Movement was founded in the 1970s by Shaykh Abd al-Qadir as-Sufi al-Murabit, a Scotsman also known by his former name Ian Dallas. It has since spread from its base at the "Norwich Academy" in Britain, to other parts of Europe, Africa, the United States, Southeast and Central Asia, and Australia. In Germany for example there are two groups in Freiburg and Potsdam, known as Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland and linked to the Weimar Institut, which publishes the newspaper *Islamische Zeitung*.² The principal aim of the Weimar Institut is to promote studies about the relations between Western cultural heritage and Islam—this also explains why Goethe is an important point of reference.

The Murabitun belong to the Darqawi order founded in Morocco at the end of the eighteenth century. Their name alludes to the Almoravid dynasty which ruled the Maghrib and Spain in the eleventh century. In general, the Murabitun have a rather negative public image and have been accused of both fundamentalism and Nazism. It has been alleged that they want to re-establish the caliphate in Europe and recover al-Andalus, that their "aggressive" missionary activities deliberately concentrate on regions with intense social conflict (e.g. Chiapas, Chechnya, and eastern Germany), that their shaykh has personal ties with neo-Nazi groups, and that their ideology and discourse contain strong fascist and anti-Semitic ideas.³ Their financial sources have been reported as being obscure and connected in some way to Malaysia and Dubai.

On their own websites the Murabitun themselves promote adherence to a lifestyle based on the rules by which the Prophet governed Medina as transmitted by Imam Malik, and, most important, autonomy from and boycott of the capitalist banking system and its usurious practices which are held responsible for the fall of the last caliphate. This means that in the long run all trade should function on the basis of dinars and dirhams and correct zakat should be restored. Till then, they offer a system of e-dinars on the internet (www.e-dinar.com), and within their communities try to avoid paper money which is considered haram (forbidden). Murabitun discourse, especially that of the shaykh himself, is often marked by a rather aggressive critique of Western hegemony, positivist science, and capitalism, and contains overtly anti-Semitic expressions.

The new Muslims of Chiapas

The Spanish Murabitun community, the Comunidad Islámica en España (www.cislamica.org)—based in Granada, Spain, where it helped finance the

Cathedral of San Cristóbal



PHOTO BY NATASCHA GARVIN, 2004

Albaicín mosque inaugurated in July 2003—has the strongest ties to the Mexican community. The Spanish missionary Mohammed Nafia, now emir of the Comunidad Islámica en México, arrived in the Mexican state of Chiapas shortly after the Zapatista uprising. After some unsuccessful attempts at converting members of the Zapatista movement, he managed to convince Domingo López Angel, the leader of a Protestant organization whose members or their parents had been expelled from their homes in nearby San Juan Chamula by Catholic traditionalists, to convert to Islam and join the Murabitun movement. Members of this community now live in the poorest areas of San Cristóbal.⁴

Religious conflicts such as those that led to the expulsion of the Protestants of San Juan Chamula are unfortunately quite common in Chiapas—the least Catholic state of Mexico (only about 64% of the whole population) and the most religiously plural one. This pluralism is reflected in the life stories of many Chiapanecs who have already experienced various conversions, in most cases first from Catholicism to Protestantism and then to different denominations within Protestantism. The Council of Indigenous Representatives of the Highland of Chiapas (CRIACH) was founded due to the vulnerability of the expelled Protestants in order to defend their rights, but it also plays a significant role in local politics.

Although CRIACH now also includes people of mixed descent, the expelled Protestants are predominantly Tzotzils and Tzeltals. So too are those who have converted to Islam in San Cristóbal. The reasons for conversion to Islam are numerous: some converts reported the tax demanded by the Protestant churches as their motivation for conversion. Others, in particular women, have noted the experience of communal living (see below), especially the exclusive space for women, the feeling of protection provided by the headscarves, a more harmonious family life, mainly due to the prohibition of alcohol, a better economic situation, and a change in status relations among the Murabitun in which age is more important than ethnic group or gender. Family ties also play an important role as a motivation for conversion in the case of indigenous converts—frequently the conversion of the head of the family leads to the conversion of its other members, although some conversions have also led to the disruption of the family.

Today the Murabitun of San Cristóbal form a community of about 200 indigenous and non-indigenous Mexicans as well as other Latin American and European (mostly Spanish) converts living together in a commune which includes a Quranic school, a kindergarten, and workshops for carpentry and tailoring (www.islammexico.org.mx). They also own two pizzerias, one in the centre of town and the other in nearby Comitán, where the menu is tailored to the tastes of the (numerous) tourist clientele, with the aim of obtaining economic autonomy. The indigenous converts to Islam are expected to acquire Western food habits, adopt Muslim names, and, in the case of women, to wear headscarves. Polygamy is allowed and practiced by a few men, but only on condition that they can give all their wives equal economic and emotional care. Linguistically, the Mexican converts are gradually switching from Mexican to Peninsular Spanish.⁵

Community conflicts

The Murabitun community split in 1999 over the issue of disrespect for indigenous culture, authoritarianism of the leadership, the practice of polygamy, and pressures on families to give up their land and take their children out of school. The small number of families who abandoned the Murabitun, but maintained their allegiance to Sunni Islam, received some financial support from the aforementioned CCIM. Conflicts have also arisen with Mexican state authorities and the Spanish embassy, especially since 11 September 2001 and 11 March 2004 (date of the terrorist attack on the Madrid train), the main problems being the residence permits for the Spaniards and suspicions concerning money laundering and connections to the Zapatista liberation movement in Chiapas and the Basque separatist organization ETA. The local

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and national media also criticize the Murabitun, accusing them, for example, of exploiting the converts as unpaid workers in their businesses. The emir Mohammed Nafia is said to have been imprisoned in Spain and the US for his alleged Islamist activities and to have offered money and weapons to the Zapatistas in exchange for their conversion. At the same time the media provide the Murabitun with the opportunity to disseminate their views about, for example, the US war in Iraq.

The community in San Cristóbal has been portrayed as suspicious, especially towards journalists, and of proselytizing quite aggressively, urging interested outsiders to say the shahada soon after their first contact with the

community. After converting, the new members are said to be pressurized to really give up every aspect of their pre-Murabitun life, including contacts to non-Muslim family members, public school attendance of the children, and their Mayan culture in case of the indigenous community members.

The radical attitude of the community as well as its closed nature are in sharp contrast to other Sufi orders, e.g. the aforementioned Nur Ashki Jerrahi, but fit well into the image of the Murabitun movement. On the one hand it seems to be attractive especially for Europeans precisely because of its Sufi teachings that focus on the spiritual awakening of the individual and the feelings of security, harmony, and peace which communal living seems to promise. On the other hand, the political nature of Murabitun ideology, observed mainly on their websites and in the discourse of the shaykh and other prominent figures, also seems to have consequences for local communities, precisely because their leaders implement this ideology through strict rules and try to protect their communities against outsiders. Of course this also has to do with the current hostility towards Islam in the West (and Mexico is no exception), but in the case of Chiapas the situation is further complicated by the political and religious conflicts in the region. Explanations for the success of Islam in San Cristóbal and especially among indigenous people by social scientists working in the area mainly concern the favourable environment of San Cristóbal because of its high level of religious diversity—besides Catholics and Protestants there are also Buddhists, Hindus, and different New-Age-groups due to the influx of tourists and dropouts—and the high receptivity of local people to all forms of religion and communal living. Their “conversion careers” are seen by some as a kind of natural evolution from their “polytheist” variant of Catholicism with its multitude of saints via Trinitarian Protestantism to monotheist Islam. But they might also point to a pragmatic attitude towards religious affiliation, leading to further questions about the advantages of conversion to Murabitun Islam especially for this section of Mexican society.

Notes

1. This article is mainly based on internet research and on field work carried out in Mexico in July and August 2004. I would like to thank Dr Aparna Rao for her critical comments on an earlier version of this article.
2. Ursula Spuler-Stegemann, *Muslime in Deutschland: Informationen und Klärungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002): 139-140. I would like to thank Prof. Jamal Malik for drawing my attention to this source.
3. See murabitun.cyberummah.org, the website of a former Murabitun member who seeks to reveal the ties of the movement both with Freemasonry and neo-Nazis.
4. Marco Lara Klahr, “¿El Islam en Chiapas?: el EZLN y el Movimiento Mundial Murabitun,” *Revista Académica para el Estudio de las Religiones* 4(2002): 79-91.
5. Juana María Ruiz Ortiz, “Entrevistas a mujeres indígenas sobre el islam,” *Anuario de Estudios Indígenas* 9(2003): 151-188; Angélica Schenerock, “Más allá de velos y peinados: Las reelaboraciones étnicas y genéricas de las chamulas musulmanas sufis en San Cristóbal de Las Casas,” paper read at the Tenth Latin American Congress about Religion and Ethnicity in San Cristóbal, July 2004.

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