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Muslims in Cuba

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The early presence of the Islamic faith in Cuba, as in many other parts of Latin America, is commonly dated back to the Spanish Conquest. It is likely that some sailors that traveled with Christopher Columbus in 1492 were converts to Islam and Crypto-Muslims. During centuries of colonization by the Spanish, there were Moorish slaves, *imazigen* (Berbers) slaves, as well as Muslim African slaves (Mandingos, Fulani) that were not able to practice their faith and suffered forced conversions, in accordance with Spanish royalist laws of XVI century. These laws specifically prohibited “the entrance in the New World of Berber slaves or free persons converted from Moorish parentage and their descendants,” because “in this new land where we are planting the new faith it is good to avoid the presence of the sect of Mohammed, or any other offense to God our lord, that could damage our Holy Catholic faith.”¹

Catholicism was the only official religion and Islamic practices were prohibited. Nevertheless religious practices of African origin persisted through a process of transculturation, according to the famous Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who in his 1940 book *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y del Azúcar*, stated: “I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called *neoculturation*”.²

¹ Quoted by Miguel Rodríguez Ferrer: *Naturaleza y civilización de la grandiosa Isla de Cuba*, Madrid, 1876, t. 2, pp. 485-486.

² Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar*, Consejo Nacional de Cultura, La Habana, 1963, p. 103.

The abolition of slavery in the XIX century favored new influxes of Asiatic labor to the Caribbean region during XIX and the beginning of XX centuries. Migrants of primarily Asiatic origin came from India (Hindus and Muslims) and from the island of Java in Indonesia (Muslims that concentrated basically in Surinam). The case in Cuba, however, was somewhat different, due to the constant migration fluxes of labor forces that arrived from Spain, and, instead of receiving groups from India or Indonesia, Cuba took advantage of farm-laborers from Jamaica and Haiti, and Chinese coolies in order to provide the necessary labor on the island.

The weakening of the Ottoman Empire also favored other migration flows during the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century. These population movements consisted of Christians and Muslims from the Middle East to Latin America in general. Cuba served mainly as a transit site for migrants interested in reaching the United States, Mexico and other countries, but many of the newcomers decided to stay in the island.

At least in the Cuban case, it is not easy to find very strong data about the migrants from the Middle East. In many cases their names and regions of origin were changed or distorted, and they were not asked about their religious beliefs.

Those first migrants were followed by other waves during critical periods (1948, 1967, and 1973, until today) to Latin America, but the process stopped in the Cuban case due to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and the subsequent restricted migratory policy that was adopted by the government.

In general two main patterns of Muslim migrations can be detected in the Caribbean region:

1- In many cases Muslim migrants were isolated and inserted in small communities with a weak religious life, the group dispersed, there was no *masjid*, no *imam*, no *madrassa*, they lost their basic practices (*salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, *hajj*), the religion was not transmitted in the family context. There was a process of assimilation and conversions, so Islam was commonly seen as a “religion of the elders”.

2- In other cases (mainly in Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago) mosques were built, the Islamic community associated and grew, they kept their practices and identity, developed strong contacts with the *umma*, and even, according to Raymond Delval, created “focuses of islamization.”³

The Cuban case is more in line with the first type. In fact, the Islamic factor did not develop in the first decades of the 20th century in Cuba. There was neither group cohesion nor self identification, although the presence of Muslims is reported, for example, in some old registration acts of the Lebanese consulate in Havana.⁴ There were individual or domestic practices, but not a single mosque was built. Additionally, there is no news regarding the formation of any Muslim associations, so it seems that a process of conversion to other religions and assimilation within the larger Cuban culture prevailed.

Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, an exodus of some members of the Arab community took place, and although the aforementioned restricted migratory policy was a clear obstacle to new potential immigrants from any part of the world, including the Middle East,

³ Raymond Delval, *Les musulmans en Amérique Latine et aux Caraïbes*, Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 1992.

⁴ Rigoberto Menéndez, *Los Árabes en Cuba*, Ediciones Boloña, La Habana, 2007, pp.233-252

Cuban foreign policy developed close relations with many Arab and Islamic countries as part of its global projection, including landmark events such as the severing of relations with Israel in 1973 and the organization of the 6th Non Aligned Movement Summit in Havana in 1979.

In that same year, the Arab Union of Cuba was founded through a process involving the combination of various associations. The Arab Union developed strong linkages with Cuban political spheres such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of International Relations of the Cuban Communist Party.

It is well known that Cuba has granted scholarships to students from Africa, Asia and Latin America,⁵ so this explains the presence of some Muslim students on Cuban soil since the starting of this educational program. But during many years these students maintained their faith in a very modest manner in order not to interfere with the materialist-dialectic Marxist-Leninist education they were receiving. Afterwards, Muslim students develop their practices in a more open manner as a result of the reevaluation and amendments on religiosity that came to be promoted by the Cuban political leadership.

One of the first signs of these re-evaluative processes can be found in the interview of the Brazilian monk Frei Betto with Fidel Castro in 1985, published in a book entitled *Fidel y la religion*.⁶ There the Cuban president said that in no way should socialism and communism

⁵ More than 50 thousands graduated until 2008.

⁶ *Fidel y la religión. Conversaciones con Frei Betto*, Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, La Habana, 1985, 379 p.

interfere deep down inside a person, nor deny the right of every human being to his thinking or religious beliefs.

In 1991 the 4th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) approved that religious persons could be full members, militants of the Party, and a year later two important constitutional amendments were approved. Article 8 clarifies that: “The state recognizes respects and guarantees freedom of religion. In the Republic of Cuba, religious institutions are separate from the state. The different beliefs and religions enjoy the same consideration.”

Article 54 (1) of the 1976 Constitution expressed the notion that: “The Socialist state, that bases all its activities and educates the people on the scientific materialist conception of the universe, recognizes and guarantees freedom of consciousness, the right of everyone to profess and practice, within the framework of respect for the law, the religious belief of his preference.” This was then replaced by Article 55 in the 1992 Constitution: “The state, which recognizes, respects and guarantees freedom of conscience and of religion, also recognizes, respects and guarantees every citizen's freedom to change religious beliefs or to not have any, and to profess, within the framework of respect for the law, the religious belief of his preference.”

Those new political and juridical approaches made possible the emergence of Islam in Cuba at the beginning of the 1990's. This took place in the context of moments of deep uncertainty and disappointment precipitated in large part by the ending of the Soviet Union and the collapse of European Socialist countries. Those huge and sudden changes in international relations strongly affected the Cuban economy, so the severe economic crisis that resulted was named the “Special Period in Time of Peace,” and was officially explained as a result of the “Dual blockade” imposed by the United States and the former socialist partners.

This new situation encouraged the searching of new answers for spiritual needs and strengthened religious practices, and in a parallel way there was also a process of recovering other kinds of communal identities. Both searches had spiritual causes but also very strong economical motivations. The reconstruction of communities of Spanish origins, the revitalization of the Jewish community, as well as the interest in demonstrating juridical links with ancient European relatives and so on, were linked mainly with the interest in migration or receiving the economic support that some members of different communities started to have access to.

At this particular juncture Pedro Lazo Torres (Yahya) made the following discovery: "...I found a Quran, I started to study it, and, as I was searching for a spiritual space, I understood Islam and accepted it as a revealed faith."⁷ Since that moment, he started to gather some other people in order to form the new Cuban Islamic community.

At the beginning of the 1990's the group was mainly integrated by black people from urban areas with serious economic problems in Havana City as Centro Habana and La Lisa, but this factor has been changing during recent years with a wider diversity and the development of new small communities in other places distinct from Havana, as in Matanzas, Camagüey, Isla de la Juventud, Villa Clara, Santiago de Cuba, and Cienfuegos.

Since its inception the new community was supported by the Islamic activism of some diplomatic missions in Havana, particularly those of Nigeria, Algeria, and Iran. In recent years, the Iranian embassy in Havana seems to have been the most active in this regard, as well as

⁷ Quoted in "Inicio del Islam en Cuba", Organización Latinoamericana para la Defensa de la Democracia", April 2008, <http://ciempre.com/bin/content.cgi?article=42>

Islamic missions coming from countries like Qatar, The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, promoting contacts, offering support and extending invitations for participation in *hajj* (though until 2009 these attempts were unsuccessful).

It is obvious that many doubts have been expressed about the original legitimacy of the community. It is quite difficult determining how many of its members are truly believers and find a new answer in Islam. It is also complex to determine how many others are integrating into the group with some other pragmatic interests like experiencing new social recognition, participating in different activities sponsored by some embassies in Havana, being in contact with foreign Islamic delegations, receiving some economic support, leaving the country, and so on. It is also possible that some members of the Cuban Islamic community are developing high expectations associated with the idea that some great Muslim countries promoting the Islamic message are very wealthy nations with institutions that will support Muslim communities all over the world including the Cuban's. Some other members could have both ingredients (religious needs and pragmatic interests) as their main motivations.

In any case, the new Islamic community found an empty space and has developed in the middle of a long and strong social and economical crisis.

Although Pedro Lazo is considered the leader of the whole community, there exists a division since the beginning between Shiites and Sunnis. In the case of Sunnis, they say that "Cuban Islam does not adopt one particular school of thought (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali); it is a mixing of Maliki and Shafi'i (...) we search for a global learning, that is, to take from the four philosophical schools the best parts that could be adapted to the Cubans."⁸

⁸ Quoted in <http://ciempre.com/bin/content.cgi?article=46>

It is also very important to take into consideration the flexible interpretations that many Cuban Muslims have argued for since the first years, favoring the need to develop a specific “Cuban Islamic faith,” that should take into consideration some particularities of the Cuban social and cultural reality such as: the possibility of eating pork and drinking beer, to avoid fasting (*sawm*), not to carry out circumcision, and to understand the Koran only through translations in Spanish because: “Allah knows all languages.” At least in public manifestations, the community is acting more in line with the basic precepts of the Islamic faith, but such arguments in favor of a “flexible and pragmatic Islam” are regularly expressed.

During the first years Cuban Muslims occasionally prayed in the Arab’s House of the City Museum (specially the *salat al yumua*)⁹ but afterwards they developed their ceremonies in their own houses, mainly in Pedro Lazo’s house. Different ceremonies such as marriage and funerals were initially headed by Muslim diplomats, but this situation is also changing.

The number of Cuban Muslims is estimated by different sources to be between 500 and 1000 persons. The official web site of the Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry (MINREX) recognizes only 200, but the Islamic Cuban community says there are 550 actively participating.¹⁰ The Islamic community has recognized that they are suffering desertions, probably an appropriate indicator of opportunistic joining and frustrated expectations on the part of some of its members.

⁹ The *salat al yumua*, is the only prayer practiced and allowed nowadays in the Arab’s House.

¹⁰ A very small number compared with a population of 11 million Cubans.

The different activities of the Islamic community have never been prohibited since the birth of the group and they have even been able to maintain periodical contact with the Department of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. During many years, however, there was a strong refusal on the part of the Cuban government and the Party officials to formally recognize the Islamic community. In February 2007, this was resolved when the community was officially registered in the Registro de Asociaciones, as Liga Islámica de Cuba (Cuba's Islamic League), with Pedro Lazo as his head.

It is likely that warmer relations with Islamic countries such as Iran, Qatar and even, more recently Saudi Arabia, and others, could have helped with the official recognition and support for the community.¹¹ It seems that the topic was, in fact, discussed during visits of high ranking religious persons and delegations from Islamic countries, and particularly during the visit in May 2001 of Sheikh Mohammed ibn Nasser Al-Aboudy, Under Secretary General of the Muslim World League.

MINREX web page also states that: “the building of a mosque has been approved, so the first steps have been undertaken,”¹² and it is said that it is going to be built with Cuban financial sources, which could be a suitable option in order to avoid political and religious preferences for one or other project suggested by one or other Islamic country with Sunna or Shia tendencies.

In summary, the presence of a small Islamic community in Cuba today is mainly the result of conversions generated in a very particular political, social and economical period of Cuban history, and has neither connection nor continuity with previous Muslim presence in

¹¹ In 2008, Turkey's IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation) offered Cuban Muslims food aid during the holy month of Ramadan, in Havana, Matanzas and foreign students in the Isle of Youth (that also received cash donations).

¹² MINREX, “La religión en Cuba”, disponible en:
http://america.cubaminrex.cu/Actualidad/2008/Religion_Cuba.html

Cuba. In spite of the existence of doubts about the original legitimacy of this new phenomenon and its evolution, it seems that Cuban Muslims will remain as one of the newest element of the Cuban cultural diversity for the foreseeable future.

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