

Finding Islam in Detroit: The Multiple Histories, Identities, and Locations of a City and Its Muslims

Andrew Shryock, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan

In the three years since the 9/11 attacks, I have often been invited to talk about, explain, or do research on Islam in the U.S. These invitations are almost always based on my work among Arab Americans in Detroit, and I have felt strange about reformulating my knowledge of Arab Americans to fit the growing demand for knowledge of Muslims in America. Detroit's Arab population, which is one of the oldest and largest in North America, has probably always been majority Christian. In 2003, the Detroit Arab American Study, a survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, found that the community was 58% Christian and 42% Muslim. Still, most Americans assume Arabs are Muslim, and in the Detroit area, the most visible and influential Arab constituencies are located in Dearborn, a suburb of 99,000 people, about a third of whom are Muslims from Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen. The DAAS found that 64% of the Detroit area's Arab Muslims live in Dearborn and adjacent Dearborn Heights, whereas only 5% of Christian Arabs do. The Dearborn Muslims can boast two thriving business districts, ten mosques, two Islamic schools, and an impressive range of village clubs, advocacy groups, business associations, and human service agencies.

I have done research in Dearborn, and elsewhere in Arab Detroit, since 1987, and during this time – in fact, until the 9/11 attacks – the dominant public identity discourses, and the most powerful community organizations, have been “Arab American,” not Muslim. Arab American identity, which became widespread in Detroit in the 1970s, was framed as an alternative to “older” religious and national identities, which it was supposed to unify. Moreover, the secular, ethnic character of Arabness made it easier for state and federal agencies to provide financial support to organizations that called themselves “Arab” (as opposed to groups that were exclusively Muslim or Christian). Institutionalizing these channels of support has been urgent business in Detroit for many years. The U.S. immigration reforms of 1965, followed by wars and political instability in the Middle East, have brought tens of thousands of Arabs to Detroit. The 2000 Census recorded about 125,000 Arabs, Chaldeans, and Assyrians in the Detroit area; community leaders routinely claim a population of 375,000 or more. Although immigrants from Greater Syria began arriving in Detroit in the late 19th century, the Arab community today is largely foreign born. The DAAS found that, among the adult population, 75% were born abroad.

Powerful Arab institutions, all of them secular, have emerged to facilitate relations between this immigrant/ethnic population, the state, and the larger society. The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) and the Arab American and Chaldean Council (ACC), each with an annual budget of over \$10,000,000; the American Arab Chamber of Commerce (AACC), which represents thousands of entrepreneurs and business professionals; and the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), which advocates for fair treatment of Arab Americans and defense of their civil rights – these organizations dominated the political and public culture of Arab Detroit before 9/11, and they are even more influential today. In fact, these very organizations, because they are highly effective and well established, have received almost all of the tens of millions of dollars that have flowed into Detroit's Arab communities from private foundations, corporate donors, and government agencies in the aftermath of 9/11. Ironically, much of this funding is earmarked for cultural and educational programs that are meant to improve public understanding not of Arabs per se, but of Arabs as Muslims, or Arabs and Islam. The fact that the majority of local Arabs are Christian does not stop the money from rolling in, of course, but specifically Muslim organizations, activists, and leaders find this state of affairs disconcerting, as they watch Arab American groups (led by people who are often not

devout Muslims or are not Muslim at all) accumulate resources that enable them to dominate the public representation of Islam in Detroit.

This is the political backdrop against which I and other researchers must “find” Islam in Detroit today. As I have been coaxed into studying Arabs as Muslims, and Muslims as Americans, I have become aware of how important, and how vexing, the links between Arabness and Islam are for all Muslims in Detroit, especially those who are not of Arab backgrounds. I have spent much of the last two years developing new approaches to the study of Detroit’s Muslims that (1) acknowledge the formative impact Arabs have had on the history and current perceptions of Islam in the city while (2) exploring a wider range of identities, histories, and locations that constitute “Islam in Detroit,” both today and in the past. What follows is a brief account of these experiments in method and focus.

Surveying the Landscape, all over again

The post-9/11 demand for knowledge about Muslims in Detroit has already produced two large surveys of the community. The Detroit Mosque Study, conducted by Ihsan Bagby and funded by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, found 33 mosques in greater Detroit and interviewed 1,xxx worshipers at 12 Arab, South Asian, and African American congregations. The Detroit Arab American Study, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, was not focused specifically on Muslims, but it produced the first large-scale, quantitative portrait of Arab Muslims, who represented 42% of the 1016 people it surveyed. I participated in the latter study. As an ethnographer, I found the process fascinating and frustrating. The prospect of asking over 1,000 people the same question was appealing to me, as was the potential to give a reliable numerical dimension to qualitative knowledge about the community. I was dissatisfied, however, by the distance the procedure placed between the research team, who devised questions, the interviewers (most of whom I never met), and the interviewees (who exist now only in their coded responses). Both surveys produced valuable results and received extensive media coverage. The DAAS found that Arab Muslims are majority Shi’a (56%), that they have experienced more harassment and feel more vulnerable post-9/11 than Christian Arabs, that they are less likely than Christians to identify as “white,” that (despite all this) they have higher levels of confidence in public schools, local police, and the U.S. legal system than members of the general population do. The DMS, meanwhile, found that Detroit area mosques are growing rapidly, that most of the people who attend them have “moderate” doctrinal and political view, that most advocate participation in the U.S. political system, that two-thirds are immigrant, that conversion rates in Detroit are low, and that area mosques are divided along racial and ethnic lines.

This particular style of “finding Islam” relies on, and encourages, the idea that very little is known, or known reliably, about Muslims or Arabs in Detroit, a claim that secures the “benchmark,” or “landmark” status so coveted by surveyors even as it privileges (as “objective”) the kind of data surveys create. Also, these studies necessarily derive most of their currency from their location between a “mainstream” context of evaluation, coded as a “larger society” that is non-Muslim and non-Arab, and a “marginal” context that is being marked off, evaluated, and represented. Not only were interviewees aware of this – it was one of the principal reasons why the DAAS had an unusually high, 70%, response rate – but this awareness itself marks off (and presupposes the existence of) a terrain of identity formation that is not construed or experienced in this way.

The latter terrain, which is sometimes called “cultural intimacy,” or the “off stage” area of cultural production, is not accessible to the surveyor as data, although it might shape how questions are framed and answered. The DAAS and the DMS do little to personalize Muslims or

create rich, vivid portraits of their families, their places of worship, or their community leaders; they say almost nothing about how identities emerge through local constructions of “history,” or the elaborate “code-switching” that occurs when one talks to “strangers” who will report the conversation to a larger, potentially unsympathetic audience. This, I like to think, is what ethnography does better than survey research. Yet the analytical power created by a large, rigorously constructed data set is hard to set aside, once you’ve had the pleasure of working on this scale, which, fortunately, I now have.

In the summer of 2004, I helped put together yet another local survey project, this one called *Building Islam in Detroit*. Sponsored by the University of Michigan, this study focuses on the communal spaces and institutions – mosques, schools, neighborhoods, graveyards, business districts, and collective contexts of intra-Muslim communication and display, such as newspapers and other popular media – which Muslims have created in Detroit over the last century. The particular style of “finding Islam” cultivated in this project assumes that much is already known about Arabs and Muslims in Detroit, that this knowledge is part of a decades-long collaboration among Muslims themselves, between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between local Muslims and the transnational communities to which they belong. The project is documentary in nature, with much photographing of mosques, interviews with mosque leaders, gathering of historical materials; and it will culminate not only in scholarly work, but in an exhibition produced in collaboration with local Muslims, as well as a public website on which Muslims (and non-Muslims) can tour each other’s mosques. So far, the project has taken our team of 12 graduate students and local scholars to over 60 mosques and communal worship spaces. The most encouraging aspect of this work is the consistent discovery that people are eager to collaborate with us because “finding Islam in Detroit” is something Muslims themselves do. Islam is already here when immigrants arrive; mosques are already in place; the community already has histories and “layouts,” and these have already been palpably and problematically constituted in relation to a larger framework called “America.”

Multiple Identities

The spaces and institutions we are encountering in the *Building Islam* project are most obviously organized along ethnoracial and national lines. The city of Hamtramck, a working class enclave surrounded by Detroit, is home to Yemeni, Bangladeshi, and Bosnian mosques. Dearborn’s mosques are entirely Arab, and are further divided along national lines (the Islamic Center is Lebanese; the Dix Mosque is Yemeni; the Karbala Center is Iraqi, and so on). The idea that Muslims of diverse backgrounds belong (or ought to belong) to a single community is widely accepted in Detroit. Senegalese Tijanis, Lebanese-born imams, African American mosque leaders, and even an Ahmadiyya imam (whose beliefs would be considered heretical to many Detroit Muslims) have assured us that the basic principals of Islam are shared, and that internal differences are based on “culture” or “error.” The distinction between culture and religion has been especially pronounced in our conversations with African American Muslims, especially those who came to their faith through the Nation of Islam. In a *tour de force* account of the relationship between Black Americans and Islam – which flowed from African origins to slavery to the northern migration to the unique interventions of W.D. Fard and Elijah Muhammad, and culminated in the “clean-up” accomplished by Warith al-Din Muhammad – Imam Saleem Rahman of Masjid Wali Muhammad in Detroit distinguished between immigrant Muslims, who rely too heavily on “culture,” on the “symbols, not the content” of the faith, and African American Muslims, whose culture and history have equipped them to embrace and reform Islam. “If you want to know about Islam in American,” he told us, “you’ve to know that it started right here.” In Detroit. Culture, in Imam Saleem’s narrative, was something that could lead people toward or away from faith; it did not stand to “religion” the way “negotiable” stands to “non-

negotiable.” Imam Saleem’s belief that “cultures” and “symbols” are separating immigrant Muslims from the true “meaning” of Islam replicates, oddly enough, the assessment many immigrant Muslims make of African Americans, whom they see as “too fixated on dressing or looking Muslim,” “not properly rooted in Islamic teaching,” or “too caught up in race issues.” The role of “cultural politics” as a vehicle of intra-communal critique and religious reasoning is well developed throughout Detroit.

The fact that Detroit Muslims are internally divided is not a pressing concern for everyone alike. Some take difference for granted, even posing it as evidence of Islam’s global character, or as proof of its Americanness. “Only in America,” we are often told, “can you see Muslims from so many backgrounds,” an observation that is always positive in tone, even when it leads to talk of disagreements over practice and teaching. Often, this posture is used to distinguish pragmatic tolerance from parochial certitude. Imam Hassan Qazwini, of the Islamic Center in Dearborn, told me of his exasperating exchanges with visiting imams from Lebanon and Iraq: “They come to the mosque and they see hundreds of people. They see young and old, men and women. When I arrived, maybe only a few dozen would come. We have made great progress here. But they say to me afterward, “Brother, you have a serious problem. The women are not covering properly. You can see bangs and strands of hair.” I say, “My mission in coming here is to get them into the mosque. Perhaps your mission can be to make them cover their bangs.”

We are finding that the relationship between tolerance and difference can be counterintuitive. The Daudi Bohras, a Shi’a sect whose Detroit members come mostly from India, follow the teachings of their 93-year old leader, Mohammed Barhanuddin Saheb, who lives in Mumbai and travels the world on visits to the mosques built by his diasporic community. The Bohras in Detroit do not proselytize, nor do they expect other Muslims to be like them. Their concerns over difference are directed inward and expressed in a strict dress code for men and women, a language policy favoring the use of Arabic and Lisan al-Da`wa (a mix of Arabic and Gujarati) in mosque and home, respect for their local leader (the *`amil*, a personal delegate of Barhanuddin, sent from Mumbai to teach them), a commitment to self-employment (which enables Bohras to travel with and visit the Da`I), and mutual financial assistance (which creates solidarity and autonomy). The Daudi Bohras are heavily invested in these distinctions, but these are a standard to which they hold themselves, not other Detroit Muslims: “We do our thing, and they do theirs.” At the Unity Center, a mosque located in Bloomfield Hills, one of Detroit’s most affluent suburbs, upper middle class professionals (mostly Arabs, South Asians, second generation Muslim Americans, and convert spouses) attend an elegantly designed mosque that was built, in 1993, to encourage Muslims of diverse ethnic and doctrinal backgrounds to worship and educate their children together. Inclusiveness is important here, and it is attained with considerable effort. Imam Musa, who serves the Unity Center after many years at one of the most conservative and insular mosques in Dearborn, spoke to us passionately of “diversity” and “openness,” criticizing Muslims who use cultural difference and “political parties” to build walls around their mosques. He even urged us to show the larger society how this kind of Islam (and this kind of mosque) was unhealthy. “You should put their hands to the fire,” he told me. Obviously, the line between ecumenical and disciplinary impulses is thin, and one can easily see how popular models of American multiculturalism (themselves disciplinary) are beginning to shape talk of Muslim difference in Detroit. It is primarily in the Anglophone sectors of the Muslim community – for instance, in the columns of the *Muslim Observer*, an English language weekly published in Detroit and addressed to general Muslim audience – that pan-Muslim identities are being effectively institutionalized. This zone of political organization and information flow is off limits, and often of no interest, to many immigrants, for whom the mosque is a place to pray and socialize with others who speak Bengali, say, or Serbo-Croatian (as we

have discovered when making unannounced visits to Hamtramck's Bosnian and Bangladeshi mosques, only to find no one on hand who speaks English).

Multiple Locations

Identity and difference are unintelligible apart from a politics of location. Muslims in Detroit locate their communities in diverse ways, and this is nowhere more evident than in the placement (and displacement) of mosques. Some mosques take great pride in their Americanness, a tendency that was accentuated after 9/11. The Islamic Center, founded in 1963, is now building a vast, multi-million dollar "grand mosque" in Dearborn. Its imam and board members repeatedly stress the age and American orientation of their congregation, whose internal politics are elaborately choreographed to accommodate the tastes and comfort zones of "American borns" and "immigrants," almost all of whom are Arab and Lebanese. The fact that the Center receives no aid from abroad is a fact any visitor will quickly learn. Its imams have always been foreign born and educated, but teaching at the Center is effectively bilingual, and many events cater to either English or Arabic speakers, not both. Numerically, the Center has an immigrant majority; its American orientation is partly a posture endorsed by its board of directors, who have succeeded in controlling the mosque, preventing the "immigrant takeovers" that have occurred at other Arab mosques in Dearborn since the 1970s. The posture is also an effective policy for retaining and involving young Muslims in the life of the mosque, which has one of the largest and most popular youth programs in Detroit. The Islamic Center sees itself as engaged in a simultaneous dialogue with America – its official name is "The Islamic Center of America" – and with Arab culture, both of which it wants to partake in and challenge.

This dialogical posture is emerging as a powerful formula for community relations and institution building, especially among well-established, middle class Muslims. It is not attractive to all Muslims, however. Some mosques we have visited are located in the Yemeni diaspora, or in a critique of American racism, or as outposts in global flows of *baraka* that lead to sacred centers in other countries. In a small flat in Farmington Hills, we met with a dedicated gathering of Mourids who direct their spiritual reverence, and send a good portion of the paychecks and salaries, to Touba, a city in Senegal where their Sufi brotherhood has its earthly capital. The walls of their apartment prayer space are covered with pictures of Amadou Bamba, founder of their movement, pictures of Touba and its grand mosque, artfully calligraphed sayings of the Bamba and the Prophet. There is nothing external to the apartment that would give anyone reason to think that, upon entering it, one is entering the far reaches of a spiritual empire centered in West Africa. The Mourids are a poor community, but their self-location as an outpost is not related solely to their inability to build a mosque and buy houses in the suburbs. The Dawudi Bohras, who are affluent and highly educated, worship in a simple, elegant mosque in Farmington Hills. It was the first Daudi Bohra mosque built in the U.S., and Syed Burhanuddin and a delegation of his sons came to Detroit to consecrate it in 1982. The mosque is peculiar in that it has no external signage, no minaret or dome, nothing to announce its Muslim-ness. It is a large white box. Inside, it is a remote site in a global network whose central node is Barhanuddin Saheb himself. The mosque is adorned with his image, his names, his genealogy, his teachings. The food consumed there, the clothes worn, the languages taught to the children – all are designed to strengthen ties to the Da'I and his message.

While some Detroit Muslims connect themselves to a distant center, others bring remote places to Detroit and rebuild them. Masjid Mu'ath Bin Jabal, in Detroit, is located at the center of a neighborhood that is resolutely Yemeni. Established in 1976, the mosque is located today in an old church building with an attached charter school. Small shops that cater to Yemenis line an adjacent street. Young men socialize in front of the local grocery, speaking a *mélange* of Arabic

and English, while bicycle brigades of Yemeni children cruise the streets. The neighborhood was blighted and dangerous when Yemenis starting moving there in the 1970s, but the degraded housing stock was cheap. Over the last 20 years Yemeni workers have bought and repaired dozens of houses and, in increasing numbers, have brought their wives and children to Detroit; their school, mosque, and stores are the infrastructure of a stable, socially and morally conservative enclave that has excellent relations with the Detroit police, the public school system, and city government, all of whom appreciate the grassroots urban reclamation project the Yemenis are running in their slice of Detroit. Bangladeshis and Iraqis are building similar enclaves elsewhere in the city. These attempts to preserve difference are creating economic and political conditions that favor recognition, just as the entrepreneurial and professional achievements of the Bohras – part of an elaborate economy of gifts and financial devotion to the Da'I, as well as charitable work and mosque renovation around the globe – have supported both separateness and, wherever they now live, the cultivation of ties to important local political and economic interests important to the Bohra desire to travel, build their own institutions, and strengthen their internal economy.

Multiple Histories

Though dominated today by immigrants, Detroit's Muslim landscapes are connected to histories that are much older than most local Muslims realize. The first mosque in Detroit was established in Highland Park in 1921 by Mohammed Karoub, a Lebanese businessman. It opened to great fanfare. According to a newspaper account published in 1926, when the failed mosque was sold, Karoub's announcement "that he would build a mosque for Detroit Musselmen rang throughout the Moslem world and raised Detroit, in their eyes, to the rank of London and Budapest, the only other holy cities in the occident. Gifts of money toward the erection of the mosque came from all parts of the country. From the king of all Egypt came a Persian rug of the finest weave and the gift of a ring from his own hand. The king of Mecca sent 400 pounds of Turkish money." The same report mentions that, by 1921, the "Mohammedan community in Detroit" already consisted of "16,000 men and women drawn from Persia, Turkey, Spain, Morocco, Siberia, Arabia and Syria."

Imam Mohammad Mardini of the American Muslim Center, collects historical information on Detroit Muslims. He has seen Xeroxes of this article, which occasionally resurfaces to be read and talked about by area Muslims. The Highland Park mosque is historical ground zero for communities that have long since moved apart or collapsed or disappeared entirely. Imam Mardini first learned of Detroit's "old Muslims" when he took over as imam of the American Muslim Bekaa Center, whose departing imam, Mohammad ("Mike") Karoub, was nephew of the founder of the Highland Park mosque. Mardini, who came to the U.S. in the 1980s, told me that he had spent his early days in Detroit traveling around Michigan burying members of these old mosques: Turks, Lebanese, Albanians, "Crimeans." He was surprised, then, by "how American their families had become. They looked and acted just like Americans. It was hard for me to accept. I still thought of Americans a non-Muslims, and Muslims as living in America, but not really being Americans." Imam Mardini now preaches in a mosque that prides itself on its links to this older generation of Muslims. Several members of his mosque are children and grandchildren of people who prayed in Highland Park. His sermons are in English; he recites the Quran in English and Arabic; and the walls of his new building, located in a renovated church in Dearborn, are decorated with English and Arabic calligraphy depicting verses from the Quran and hadith. In his spare time, which is not ample, he continues to piece together archival materials for a book on the history of Islam in America.

Mardini is not alone. We have met lay historians in several mosque communities, each tending private archives that transect with available scholarship, oral history, and the collections of other lay historians. These histories are appealing to local Muslims. They show that the Muslim community is old, that it has claims to American-ness of the kind that only the passage of time can make credible. They show that communities now distant from each other were once closer: Mufti Mohammed Sadiq, first missionary of the Ahmadiyya movement to America, was also the first imam of the Highland Park Mosque; Shi'a and Sunni once worshipped together at the Islamic Center; local immigrant Muslims were in closer contact with local Nation of Islam congregations than is now realized or remembered. Even elements of organizational life and the evolution of building projects seem to be part of a shared history which is now being acknowledged: for instance, the developmental arc of mosque creation, which begins with the acquisition of a prayer space, then a move to a house or apartment, then the purchase and refurbishment of an existing structure (a church, a warehouse, an old workshop, a restaurant, a bank), the construction of a mosque "from the ground up," and finally the establishment of the mosque-school-cultural center, which is now the aspiration of nearly every active mosque community we have visited. These trajectories frame the histories of dozens of local mosques; and movement through these stages, in the proper order, is a convenient way to measure the success and health of one's community.

The reassurance of precedent, and the predictability of its received forms, makes local histories compelling, but also dreadful for many Detroit Muslims. Historical knowledge can show how different – how "mistaken" – Muslims were in the past, and how these "mistakes" might be made again in future. Old pictures of Muslim women's auxiliaries, whose contributions built several Detroit mosques, show devout women who apparently felt no need to dress "modestly," their hair uncovered, their arms bare. Much discussed, too, is the perceived laxity and heterodoxy of the old imams, who allowed dancing in mosques, permitted women who were uncovered or menstruating to enter the building, did not speak or read Arabic well, or were too accepting of marriage to non-Muslims. These "failings" are often posed as a "potential recurrence" that should be guarded against, not as evidence of adaptability or, least of all, as evidence of the ongoing transformation of Islam and Muslims in American contexts. African Americans, who do not contend in the same way with the displacements and discontinuities of immigration, seem to be the only Muslims in Detroit who can embrace, in a single narrative, the dramatic transformations that have reshaped their community over the last 70 years.

Transections

Among Detroit Muslims, the lure and repulsion of history operates in parallel with the lure and repulsion of difference. Our initial survey period has shown us how little interaction there is between local mosque communities across racial and national lines, yet how curious they are to learn about each other's activities, beliefs, and histories. The idea that Muslims are a large, diverse, and old community is especially reassuring today. In the aftermath of 9/11, Detroit's Muslims have begun to see each other through the powerful lens of Americanization, which causes them to regard each other in from the standpoint of mutual risk and public image management. This lens focuses most intensely on Arab Muslims, who are the largest, most vulnerable, and most influential Muslim communities in Detroit. As a result, African, South Asian, and European Muslims have always made a point of setting themselves apart from Arabs when they talk to us – often in ways we find troublesome and unnecessary – but we have noticed that even Arabs do the same. Eid Alawan, a spokesman for the Islamic Center, told us he was proud of his Arab heritage, "but I don't call myself an Arab American. In recent years I've grown much closer to my religious identity." The shift toward Muslim First identities scholars have noticed across the U.S. and Europe is unfolding in Detroit as well. Even the big Arab American

organizations host cultural education workshops in which the phrase “Not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs” is repeated with newfound urgency. As Arabness continues to function as a representational framework alternative or complementary to Islam, the larger context of Islam (historicized, Americanized, and globalized) is emerging as a viable terrain on which to find alternatives not only to ethnic Arabness – which retains its own value in certain contexts – but to the smallness, newness, and separateness of Detroit’s Muslim communities.

Building Islam in Detroit is developing at the heart of these new identity discourses, and I believe this is why so many Muslims – many more than we anticipated – have been willing to help us develop this project. In the aftermath of 9/11, American Muslims are eager to create a public culture that acknowledges their presence and their future place in American society. This aspiration is thwarted by the assumption that Muslims are essentially “outsiders” whose local histories are shallow and dominated by “foreign” sensibilities and ideas. Such assumptions pervade scholarship and political discourse alike. They demand critique, but also a constructive response. *Building Islam in Detroit* will enable us to join local Muslims in building new communities of memory, shared knowledge, and cultural display that are national and global in much the way American society is today.