

Shi'a Communities

Three major Shi'i groups, the twelver Shi'is, the Nizari Isma'ilis and the Bohra community compose the American Muslim Shi'a population. The term Shi'a refers to the partisans of 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. The early Shi'is claimed that 'Ali was the only legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad having been designated by him. They further restricted leadership of the community to the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*.

Shi'i theology and jurisprudence took definitive shape in the times of the fifth and sixth imams, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 733-737) and Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765). In particular, the later articulated Shi'i beliefs in the imamate (religious leadership) and was largely responsible for the construction of a definitive legal system. The imam, he stated, had to be divinely appointed, was infallible, and possessed knowledge that was divinely inspired. It was this notion of the divinely inspired and charismatic leadership of the imams that distinguished Shi'ism from the majority Sunnis.

The Twelver Shi'is in America

Among the early migrants to America in the 1880's were twelver Shi'is from what was then Greater Syria. Between 1900 and 1914 several hundred Shi'i settlers settled in Detroit to work in the Ford Motor Company. Subsequently, other Shi'is came from areas like India and Iran. By 1922, a larger community of American Shi'is had started to crystallize.

The early Shi'i migrants, most of whom were Lebanese, were quite liberal in their lifestyles and often assimilated themselves to American culture. The influx of migrants led to the establishment of Shi'i institutions and centers of worship in America. The first Shi'i mosque in America was the Islamic Center of America, established in Dearborn, Michigan, in 1963. With a population of about 75,000 Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranian migrants, Dearborn presently has one of the largest Shi'i communities in America (according to the interview by the author with an imam in Dearborn in 2006).

Unlike the earlier immigrants, the present American Shi'i community, which numbers approximately 1.5 million, is composed of highly diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Most of the contemporary Shi'is originate from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Indian sub-continent, the Gulf States, East Africa, and parts of North Africa. In addition, a growing number of Afro-Americans have converted to Shi'ism. There are at least three Shi'i Sufi organizations within the Iranian community in California.

Various factors have precipitated the proliferation of Shi'i migrants: the revolution in Iran, the civil war in Lebanon, sectarian violence and the volatile political situation in Pakistan, the exodus of East African Asians during the regime of Idi Amin in Uganda, the Russian invasion and ensuing civil wars in Afghanistan, the establishment of the Taliban regime, and the inimical socio-political conditions in Iraq. Thus, the present Shi'i community in America comprises a variety of people from many nations who represent diverse linguistic, national, ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The influx of Shi'i migrants necessitated the establishment of centers and places of worship to furnish the needs of the community. In 1976, the most prominent Shi'i spiritual leader of the time, Ayatullah al-Khu'i (d. 1992) sent a representative to establish the Khu'i Foundation in New York. 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. There are currently about one hundred and fifty Shi'i centers in America.

As with Sunni mosques, Shi'i centers have had to adapt to the new ambience so as to attract more members. Services and rituals are re-formulated to facilitate an American articulation of Islam. The older institutions incorporate English in their services and favor programs that appeal to the younger generation. In some centers, traditional supplications are recited in the vernacular instead of Arabic. In many centers in Dearborn, there is no gender segregation as women play increasingly prominent roles. This is a reflection of the shift in dynamics within these institutions.

The Shi'i experience in America is different from the Sunni one due to the influence exerted by the Shi'i scholars and the institution of *marja' iyya*. A *marja'* is the most learned juridical authority in the Shi'i community whose pronouncements on Islamic law are followed by those who acknowledge him as the religious guide. During the occultation of the twelfth Shi'i imam, the *marja'* is seen by the Shi'is as invested with the authority of re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic norms to the modern era, thereby enabling him to influence the religious and social lives of his followers. The process of following the juridical rulings of the most learned jurist (*a'lam*) is called *taqlid* (literally imitation). Due to this factor, Shi'is are allied to the *maraji'* (pl. of *marja'*) rather than to any foreign government.

A corollary to the institution of *taqlid* is the practice of giving a fifth (*khumus*) of the net savings to a *marja'* or his representative. The revenue generated from *khumus* has enabled the *maraji'* to finance the running of Islamic centers and the salaries of religious preachers in America. *Khumus* has also enabled the religious leaders to direct the religious and socio-economic lives of American Shi'is.

The Shi'i community in America is also shaped as a socio-cultural or ethnic entity assuming a common regional and linguistic background. The linguistic and cultural bias of programs held at the centers means that Shi'i communities often experience Islam in a culturally conditioned form, marginalizing them from other Shi'i communities. Many centers hold programs in languages that reflect their countries of origins (Urdu, Persian, or Arabic) thus alienating Shi'is from a different cultural or linguistic background. The predominance of ethnic centers has also meant that integration within the Shi'i community is confined to those members originating from their own ethnic backgrounds. It is only in smaller Shi'i communities in America that multi-ethnic centers are to be found.

A single thread that links the diverse Shi'i groups is their love for the family of the Prophet and the performance of rituals in the month of Muharram, when Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, was martyred in Kerbala, Iraq. These rituals are marked annually in the *husayniyyas*. The *husayniyyas* have become important vehicles for importing and then sustaining extraneous cultures. Thus, American Shi'is express their Islamic praxis 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.

The following are the key features that characterize the different ethnic Shi'i groups in America:

Iraqi Shi'is initially came here 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 affluent.

In contrast are a myriad of refugees who either escaped from Iraq or were captured by the allied forces during the Gulf war. Most of these form an unskilled labor force and work in factories and perform other manual labors. The recently arrived Iraqi refugees renew ties with the homeland, importing, in the process, their own distinctive cultural accretions. Their religious fervor is not always shared by those Iraqis who migrated to America earlier.

The Iranians form the largest Shi'i group in America. The number of Iranians migrating to America has increased dramatically during the last three decades. In fact, Iranians account for fifty two percent of Mid-Eastern Muslim immigrants in America. Most of these Iranians came to America after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and settled in California which, according to Frederick Denny, has a population of about 400,000 Iranians.

The Iranian Shi'i community in America can be divided into three distinct groups. The first group comprises professionals who 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 Western norms and culture in Iran, many of these Iranians adopted a secular lifestyle.

In contrast are fellow Iranians who also came to America after the revolution but fully support the revolution and share its ideals. Many of them are students at various Universities who promote the ideology of the current Iranian regime in Islamic centers. Much hostility is evident between the diverse Iranian groups.

The third group of Iranians comprises of 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 imbibe their youth with religious instruction, they organize events like Sunday classes, weekly lectures and Qur'anic classes in their homes.

As mentioned, Lebanese Shi'is have been here the longest. Thus, they have adapted most to American culture. Members of the Lebanese community are increasingly playing more active roles in American civil life. They tend to adopt a less rigorous approach to legalistic Islam as they have been more exposed to Western lifestyle and because they originate from a more pluralistic background.

The South Asian Shi'is are composed of migrants from Pakistan, India and a lesser number from Bangladesh. In America, they tend to experience Islam mainly through the prism of 'imported Islam' and are highly resistant to change. 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.

Initially a caste in the state of Gujarat, India, the Khoja Shi'is settled in large numbers in East Africa during the early 1900s. The majority of the Khojas migrated to the West in the 1970s and 1980s. This was a result of adverse social, economic and educational policies in East Africa. Increased emigration by the Khoja community was also precipitated by the expulsion of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin in 1972.

To accommodate the needs of the youth, most sermons in the Khoja community are delivered in English. Other transformations include the establishment of community centers that provide recreational facilities instead of mosques. Compared to many other Shi'i communities, Khoja women tend to play a greater role in their mosques as they are well represented on the executive committees and organize events for women. Khojas are renowned for their disciplined and organization.

Shi'i Institutions in America

In the past two decades, the twelfth Shi'is have established various organizations to help coordinate their activities. The largest institution is the Universal Muslim Association of America (UMAA). Created in 2003, it holds annual conferences in Washington, DC. UMAA seeks to foster unity among Shi'a Muslims and to encourage them to participate in the civic and political discourse. UMAA also seeks to dispel misgivings about Islam and the Muslims. Among UMAA's other objectives are:

1. Provide a thinkers' forum for Muslims living in the United States.
2. Facilitate discussions on social, political and economic issues.
3. Encourage Muslims to vote and participate in the political process.
4. Promote a better understanding of Islam through inter-faith dialogue.
5. Encourage research on contemporary issues unique to living in the West.
6. Coordinate with the media to educate it on issues relating to Islam.
7. Provide a common platform and forum for the Muslim youth.
8. Organize conventions, seminars and workshops to help achieve objectives.
9. Cooperate and coordinate with other organizations pursuing similar goals.
10. Publish newsletters, brochures and written material to impart information.
11. Raise funds for the organization.
12. Create a secretariat to help implement the goals and objectives of the organization.

In an attempt to unite the diverse ethnic Shi'i groups in North America, the North American Shi'a Ithna-asheri Muslim Communities (NASIMCO) was established by the Khoja community in Toronto in 1980. Twenty-four Canadian and American Shi'i communities comprising of about 10,000 people are currently members of NASIMCO. This is an umbrella organization that helps co-ordinate Shi'i religious and social activities in North America.

Among the goals of NASIMCO are to establish religious schools for community members, assist in publishing books and journals, and to educate non-Muslims regarding the tenets, doctrines, and practices of Islam. NASIMCO is also responsible for providing necessary religious guidance through regular contact with Shi'i centers of learning in Iran and Iraq, as well as financial support for capital projects undertaken by individual member communities. By acting as an umbrella organization, NASIMCO has also attempted to foster unity and promote religious, educational, social and economic amelioration of the communities. It has also financially supported the establishment of new centers in America.

The Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an (TTQ) was established in 1978 with the specific aim of publishing and distributing the Qur'an. So far, it has published thirty editions of the Qur'an, which have been sent to non-Muslims through out the world. TTQ also sends literature to bookstores and correctional facilities.

The Islamic Information Center (IIC) was established in Washington DC in 2003. It was formed to negate stereotypical images about Islam and present a better image of Islam and Muslims. The Islamic Information Center is also in contact with various media groups to educate them on the practices and beliefs of Islam. This organization also engages in interfaith dialogue.

Established since 1987, the Qur'an Account Inc was initially called the Islamic School System. Its leader is the tireless Dr. Hashim, a retired pediatrician from Iraq. Its outreach focus has been primarily on correctional facilities. Since the institute's inception, it has converted over six thousand people. The institute sends copies of the Qur'an, religious books, and has published quarterly a Bulletin of Affiliation for twenty-three years.

Established in the mid-1990's in New York, the Bilal Muslim Mission of the Americas (BMMA) now operates from Orlando, Florida. Initially, most of its outreach activities were focused on Trinidad where the BMMA tried to spread Shi'ism especially during the months of Muharram when the Hosey processions were undertaken in the name of Imam Husayn.

The focus of BMMA's activities is now America. BMMA responds to letters received from various correctional facilities. It also sends out books on Islam. BMMA also undertakes different forms of outreach programs including dialogue with non-Muslims.

The Nizari Isma'ilis

After the death of Ja'far al-Sadiq, a faction called the Isma'ilis proclaimed his son Isma'il, instead of Musa, as his successor. After Isma'il's death, they went underground and re-appeared in tenth century Egypt to establish the Fatimid dynasty. In 1094 the Isma'ilis were divided into the Musta'li (now called Bohra) and Nizari Isma'ilis. The latter espouse esoteric doctrines and believe Islamic law to be in abeyance. They accept the Agha Khan as their spiritual leader.

Most of the early Nizari Isma'ilis arrived in the West mid-1960s and settled in Canada. This steady growth continued until the early 1970s when political changes in many Asian and African countries led to the arrival of a large number of Isma'ilis in America. Wherever the followers of Agha Khan have settled, they have evolved a well-defined institutional framework through which they have made progress in the educational, health, housing and economic spheres.

The Isma'ili Community in Canada is governed by volunteers under the aegis of the Agha Khan Shi'a Imami Isma'ili Council for Canada, headquartered in Toronto. Local Isma'ili Councils are also based in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. The Agha Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of development agencies, institutions and programs working to improve living conditions and opportunities in specific regions of the developing world.

Bohra Isma'ilis

The Bohra Isma'ilis upheld the imamate of al-Musta'li (1094-1101) to succeed his father al-Mustansir in Egypt. The name Bohra denotes a "trader, merchant." Most Bohras are now of Hindu origin, their ancestors having been converted by Isma'ili missionaries. In 1588, the Bohras chose Dawud b. Qutb Shah (d. 1612) as their leader;

however, their Yemeni brethren supported the claims of Sulayman b. Hasan (d. 1597) who claimed to be the rightful successor based on a mandate from his predecessor, Dawud b. Ajab. Aliya Bohras proclaim 'Ali b. Ibrahim (d. 1637) as their twenty-ninth leader having seceded from the Dawudis in 1625.

Most Bohras are Dawudis, whose headquarters are in Surat, India. A key feature of the Bohra community is that they form themselves into guilds and restrict their activities to commerce, do not intermarry even with other Muslims, and take little part in public affairs. Two proselytes (*da'is*) have led the Bohra community in the twentieth century. The fifty-first *da'i*, Tahir Sayf al-Din (1915-1965), was an erudite scholar, social activist, and a man of great vision. During his period of fifty years he modernized the mission's organization and promoted welfare and education in the community.

Bohras reside in India, Pakistan, the Middle East, East Africa, and the West. The Bohra community in America is relatively small in number (about 25,000). Most have migrated since the 1970s and settled in different American cities, especially in Chicago, New York, and Detroit. The first Dawudi Bohra mosque was built in 1982, in Detroit. Even in America, Bohras observe strict dress codes for men and women, prefer to speak in Gujarati, and submit to the *amil*, a personal delegate sent from Mumbai to guide them.

Shi'i-Sunni Relations in America

Political and religious disputes in the Muslim world have been globalized, impacting Muslims in America. Sunni-Shi'i political and ideological differences abroad have impacted American Muslims in different spheres. These differences are visible on several campuses, the internet, and in mosques. They have also led to a rise in sectarian literature in America. Anti-Shi'i polemical literature such as *Up from Shiism* has been distributed in America since the 1980s. The tract condemns Khumayni and posits Shi'ism as a heretical movement that has deviated from 'orthodox' Sunni Islam. The Shi'is have responded by translating and circulating the works of Muhammad Tijani, a Tunisian born Sunni convert to Shi'ism, whose first work entitled, *Then I Was Guided* (1990), has had remarkable impact in converting Sunnis to Shi'ism in America.

Within the prison system, Shi'i inmates report widespread discrimination. Many complain that Shi'i books kept in the libraries have been removed by Sunni inmates. The acrimony has often led to physical confrontation within the correctional facilities and to some inmates being placed in isolation 'boxes'. Shi'i inmates now demand lectures that reflect their own faith and the right to perform rituals according to Shi'i law.

Sectarian differences within the American Muslim community have been exacerbated by the influx of immigrants who spread a conservative spirit in many communities, accentuating sectarian divisions and disputes. Both immigrant communities have imported their own bitter experiences and prejudices.

Sunni and Shi'i Imams have tried to diffuse sectarian tensions in America. Many Sunni-Shi'i conferences are held in which members of both communities are invited to participate. In Denver, an intra-faith dialogue was convened in 2006 to diffuse sectarian tensions and remove misconceptions between the Shi'i and Sunni communities. In cities like Detroit, Los Angeles and New York, several Imams have told me that the Shi'is have joined bodies that transcend sectarian boundaries, co-operating with Sunnis to provide Muslim candidates for school boards, municipal posts, working for the election of local Muslim mayors and state legislators. Shi'i institutions like al-Khu'i Foundation in New

York have persuaded their members that their votes and involvement in the political process can make a difference to their lives in America. The intent is to get Shi'is to vote for fellow Muslim candidates, planning for an eventual Muslim presence in Congress or the Senate.

Some Shi'is have also allied themselves with the Sunni based American Muslim Council (AMC). Dr. Hashim, a Shi'i proselyte living in Maryland, recalls how he used the offices of AMC to write to senators who made statements deemed offensive by Muslims. Like Dr. Hashim, many other Shi'is have subscribed to CAIR's (Council of American-Islamic Relations) mailing list and have taken positive steps to defend Muslim interests.

The Impact of September 11, 2001

Like other Muslim groups in America, since the events of 9/11, American Shi'is have had to endure the USA PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) act (see entry). Like other Muslims, members of the Shi'i community have also had to endure profiling at airports, discrimination at their work places and universities, and have suffered from negative portrayal in the media.

Furthermore, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have further revived the stereotypes and suspicions against all Muslims. In addition, vitriolic attacks on Islam and the Qur'an by some Christian fundamentalists have clearly exacerbated the current conflict in America. They have projected Islam as inherently violent and incompatible with Western values and norms.

Since the events of September 11, the Shi'i community has embarked on coalition building with other religious groups. In Dearborn, soon after 9/11, many churches called to offer support to local mosques. In addition, various Shi'i imams have told me that more churches have extended invitations to imams to speak. Inter-faith dialogue has increased tremendously as members of the American public have felt the need to understand Islam.

Since 9/11 the Wahhabis (see entry) have been identified as the perpetrators of terrorist acts. Hence, there has been more focus in the American media on Wahhabism, the Taliban, and Saudi Arabia. The Shi'is, on the other hand, have been generally presented as a more moderate and peaceful school. Ayatullah Seestani's non-violent stance in Iraq has further nurtured this favorable view.

Many Shi'i imams have told me that whereas before 9/11 the Sunnis were considered the main protagonists and spokesmen of Islam, the events of 9/11 have presented the Shi'i community with an opportunity to speak on and represent Islam to non-Muslims, especially as the invasion of Iraq has brought Shi'ism to the attention of scholars and journalists.

Liyakat Takim

University of Denver

Bibliography

‘Abdul Hadi al-Hakim, *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West in Accordance with the Edicts of Ayatullah al-Udhma as-Sayyid Ali al-Husaini as-Seestani*, translated by Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi (London: Imam ‘Ali Foundation, 1999).

Rachel Bloul, “Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France” in Metcalfe, ed., *Making Muslim Space*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 234-250.

Frederick 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* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 235-259.

Yvonne Haddad, “The Impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on the Syrian Muslims of Montreal” in Earle Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban and Regula Qureshi eds., in *The Muslim Community in North America*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1987), 165-181.

Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam after Malcolm X*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

Larry Poston, *Islamic Da’wah in the West*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Abdulaziz Sachedina, “A Minority within a Minority: The Case of the Shi‘a in North America,” in Haddad and Smith eds., *Muslim Communities in North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3-14.

Vernon Schubel, “Karbala as Sacred Space among North American Shi‘a,” in Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 186-203.

_____, “The Muharram Majlis: The Role of a Ritual in the Preservation of Shi‘a Identity in E. Waugh, S. M. Abu-Laban, R Qureshi , eds., in *Muslim Families in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991), 118-131.

_____, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi’i Devotional Rituals in South Asia*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

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

Liyakat Takim, “Foreign Influences on American Shi‘ism.” *The Muslim World* 90 (2000): 459-77.

_____ “Multiple Identities in a Pluralistic World: Shi‘ism in America.” In *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 218-32.

_____ “Shi‘i Institutes in North America.” In *Ahlul Bayt Assembly of America: Abstract of Proceedings Convention of 1996*, ed. Sayyed M. Hejazi & A. Hashim, (Beltsville, MD: International Graphics, 1997), 103-09.

_____ *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expression*, ed. Gary Laderman and Luis Léon. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003. S.v. “Shi‘ite Movements.” vol. 1, 141-144.

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