

INTEGRATION OR ISOLATION

Black Shi'ism in the American Diaspora

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While much has been written regarding the rise and experiences of the African American Muslim community, Western scholarship has paid little attention to the Black Shi'is of America. This paper will attempt to redress this imbalance. The paper will identify salient features of Black Shi'ism in America. It will argue that by embracing Shi'ism, Black Shi'is move from being a minority in America to becoming a minority within the Black American, Muslim, and Shi'i communities.

The paper will compare and contrast the experiences of the Black Sunni community and its Shi'i counterpart. It will argue that Black Shi'is need to forge an identity within and integrate into Shi'ism without compromising their distinctive Black consciousness. They will also need to foster an ideology that will distinguish them from other Black American movements.

KEYWORDS: Black Shi'is, immigrant Shi'is, ethnicity, marginalization, incarceration facilities

In a country that claims to be founded on Judeo-Christian values, the experiences of marginal groups within a minority community are often relegated to the margins of religious discourse. The sense of negligence experienced by a marginalized community is exacerbated as it is a subgroup within a minority, and thus relegated to a double (and sometimes triple) minority status. This paper will argue that due to their double-minority status, American Shi'is have been more occupied with preserving rather than disseminating their distinctive beliefs and practices. The paper will also demonstrate that, due to various factors, there has been an increasing number of members of the African American community accepting Twelver Shi'ism. The paper will also provide an insight into understanding the deleterious effects of the multiple levels of minorityness that Black Shi'is endure on a regular basis.

The article is premised upon my interactions with members of the African American community over a period of twenty-five years. In addition, I have incorporated the opinions of some Black Shi'is whom I have recently spoken to. I have also drawn upon a survey that I

conducted in 2000. The survey was sent to several Black Shi'i inmates serving in American incarceration facilities.

Understanding the specific history and challenges of any community requires a nuanced and multifarious analysis of its experiences. Unfortunately, studies on the African American Muslim community have focused on Sunni Muslims, neglecting, in the process, the experiences of the Black Shi'i community. A dearth of academic analysis of the minority groups within the Black American Muslim community has perpetuated ignorance of what it means to be a Black Shi'i in America. This paper will contend that the academic concentration on Black Sunnism conceals the discrimination and othering that is systemic within the Black Muslim community. It will also discuss the relationship between the American Shi'i immigrant community and Black Shi'is and highlight the experience of and challenges confronting Black Shi'is.¹

BLACK SHI'IS AND MAINSTREAM AMERICA

The early Muslims in America comprised primarily of slaves who were forcibly brought to the American shores from West Africa. As Sylvain Diouf has shown in *Servants of Allah*, these were primarily Sunni Muslims. Names like Ibrahima, al-Bilali, and 'Umar b. Sa'id which appear on slave registers and anecdotal accounts clearly identify them as Muslims from Africa.² There is no record of any of the slaves having espoused Shi'ism because the Shi'is had not made inroads into the Western African Muslim community. As I have argued elsewhere, the early Shi'i migrants probably arrived in America towards the end of the nineteenth century.³ Most of them were of Lebanese origins who accompanied their Sunni brethren.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Shi'is had established themselves in major American cities like Detroit, Michigan and New York City. In most instances, they came searching for employment opportunities and later decided to make America their permanent abode.

Even though their arrival in America can be traced to the early 1900s, the early Shi'i immigrants were concerned primarily with immersion in American society and improving their socio-economic status. Hence, American Shi'ism constituted a largely peripheral and unknown phenomenon in the American religious landscape. Very few mosques were built by the Shi'i community, and there is little evidence to suggest that they were either politically active or engaged in any proselytization activities.⁴ As a matter of fact, up to the 1960s, Islam in the Black community was dominated and promulgated primarily by Black movements like the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the Five Percenters.

The lack of socio-political activism by the early Shi'is can be discerned from the fact that it was the Arab American Sunni communities that were politically and socially engaged. They created various organizations to further political aims. For example, in 1971, Lebanese Americans organized the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) to educate Arab Americans about the local political process and make them aware of the issues that impacted the Muslim community. Similarly, the Arab American Institute (AAI) was established in 1984 by James Zoghby to encourage Arab Americans to participate in the American political

system and to run for office.⁵ Even though they had been residing in America for over fifty years, Shi'is chose political disengagement and quietism. Hence Shi'ism remained a largely unknown or peripheral sect of Islam until the later part of the twentieth century. Although it is difficult to estimate exact numbers, the Shi'i community in America has increased considerably since the 1970s. Various socio-political and economic factors in the Muslim and non-Muslim world contributed to the immigration of Shi'is to the American shores. Most Shi'i centres of worship in America were built after the arrival of immigrants in the 1980s.

Even when they abandoned Black Islamic movements like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, the Muslim Black community turned to Sunni rather than Shi'i Islam. This occurred more specifically after Elijah Mohammed died in 1975. His son, Warith Deen Mohammed (d. 2008), who was influenced by Saudi Arabia, claimed that his father's teachings on Islam were distorted and had been intended to attract and appease the Black community towards his version of Islam. When he abandoned his father's teachings, Warith Deen Mohammed directed his followers to Sunnism which, in his view, was the normative and correct rendition of Islam.⁶ Due to the Wahhabi attacks on Shi'ism, Shi'is were neither invited nor welcomed to join his nascent movement.

There were, however, a few exceptions. Abbas Aghdassi quotes an unnamed senior African American Shi'i in New York city who recalls meeting someone in the 1970s who gifted him a copy of the *Nahj al-Balagha*. After reading the book, he decided to transition from Nation of Islam to Shi'i Islam. He recalls other members of the Nation following him to Shi'ism.⁷

Up to the 1970s, Shi'ism was neither visible in nor a part of the American religious landscape. Since most Black Muslims were not aware of the presence of the Shi'i community in America and the differences that separated them from the Sunnis, most of them chose to accept Sunni Islam. Aghdassi states that even in 2015, it was not possible to locate a solid network of Black Shi'is. It was only after the Iranian revolution in 1979 that the American Black community became aware of and was attracted to Shi'ism. Since then, Iran has emerged as a significant contributor to the growth of Black Shi'ism in America. This can be discerned from the fact that, in the last twenty years, numerous preachers have emerged within the Black Shi'i community. Almost all of them have been trained in and graduated from the religious seminary in Qum, Iran. Many of these preachers now actively serve in Shi'i centres of worship. Some of them had earlier joined an Islamic seminary in the city of Medina, New York which was run by Shaykh Mukhtar Faizi, a Shi'i scholar. After graduating, some of the students continued their studies in seminaries in Iran.

To date, the American media has completely ignored the challenges encountered by the Black Shi'is. Their sense of isolation is enhanced by the fact that Black Shi'is are seen as deviants by the Black Sunni community for their acceptance of Shi'ism. In addition, they are marginalized and ignored by the immigrant Shi'i community which is largely drawn along ethnic lines. Thus, Black Shi'is face the challenge of negotiating and asserting a Black, Muslim, and Shi'i identity in a socio-cultural milieu that is conjoined to the dominant society's stigmatization of Islam.

All Blacks, Muslims or otherwise, are confronted with challenges like higher rates of unemployment, poverty, police shootings, gun violence, drug abuse, and mass incarceration. In addition, especially after the events of 9/11, Black Muslims have had to endure the added challenge of Islamophobia which, for Muslims has been described as 'the folk devil

par excellence of the postmodern age'.⁸ Black Shi'is, however, have experienced additional forms of discrimination especially from members of the Black Muslim community. This is because Shi'i Islam has been labelled a deviant sect within the Muslim community. By the 1980s, the Wahhabis had established many mosques in various American cities. In the Friday sermons and lectures, their religious leaders denounced Shi'ism as a heretical sect which, they claimed, was started by an estranged Jew. Gradually, but surely, those Blacks who dared to embrace Shi'ism frequently became alienated from their families, friends, and former co-religionists.⁹ They encountered discrimination and marginalization from different sectors of American society. The multiple identities held, and challenges encountered suggest that racism constitutes but one type of the numerous forms of oppression that Black Shi'is encounter. The intersection of race, religion, ethnicity, and sect enhance the dialectic of oppression; they reveal a complexity in discriminatory targeting of the other. Black Shi'is' position of multiple axes of minorityness engenders an interlocking system of oppression within the larger matrix of domination. The cumulative effect on Black Shi'is is debilitating.¹⁰

WHY CONVERT TO SHI'ISM?

It should be noted that Black conversion to American Shi'ism is often a slow and gradual process. It is also more individual than group centred. Since there are very few Shi'i proselytization institutions, it is the members of the Black community who, on their own initiative, accept Shi'ism rather than Shi'is reaching out to African-Americans. Unlike Black Sunnism in the 1970s, there is no mass or group acceptance of Shi'ism. Equally, Shi'is lack a *da'wa* (proselytization) group to reach out to the Black community.

An intrinsic element in Shi'ism that attracts many in the Black community is the spirit of defiance of oppression and subjugation. From the very beginning of their history, Shi'is have been a minority within the Muslim community and have had to endure much antagonism and suffering. As a matter of fact, Shi'ism was anchored in the concepts of protest and resistance to oppression. Such ideas resonate strongly with Blacks especially as they have had to endure racism and stigmatization in white America. Affirmation of Shi'i resistance to oppression and injustice emerged at various points in its history. Conflicts between Fatima (d. 632), the daughter of the Prophet and Abu Bakr (d. 634), the first caliph; 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661) and Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (d. 680); Husayn ibn 'Ali's (d. 680) martyrdom in Karbala and his opposition to Umayyad rule; and Zayd ibn 'Ali's (d. 740) revolt against the Umayyad forces in Kufa were further demonstrations of this stance.

Persecution produces a dialectic that is characterized by both domination and resistance. "Resisting oppression empowers the oppressed through self-definition, self-determination, and self-valuation."¹¹ Shi'ism provides Black Shi'is with a discursive space that empowers them to articulate their defiance and opposition to systems of subjugation. The potential to challenge and subvert societal norms is an element that appeals to Black communities. For many Blacks, allegiance to Shi'i Islam heightens Black consciousness while also using Shi'i models to challenge and resist American racism and social norms.

The following anecdote from a Shi'i convert is a good example of the attraction of Shi'ism and its defiance to oppression. Hashim 'Ali 'Ala al-Din, a Black convert, states:

I took the name Hashim because I found it in a book of African names which said that it was Egyptian and meant one who 'crushes and destroys evil'. This was a name which fit my characteristics. I wanted to destroy evil and establish justice – so people began to call me Hashim. Later on, I found out that this name was associated with Shi'a Islam since the Prophet's tribe is called Bani Hashim. But when I became Muslim, I needed to finish the naming process and complete my Islamic identity.¹²

In conjunction with other Black Shi'is, Hashim studied in Qum where he sensed the need to proselytize and assist others in having a better understanding of Shi'ism. With his participation, the Islamic Foundation Cooperation (IFC), was founded, an institution that helps Black Shi'is visit and possibly study in Iran.¹³

Jamal Raheem is a high school history teacher living in Miami. He converted forty-two years ago and became a Shi'i in 2013. He was inspired by the Iranian revolution and by Hashim 'Ali 'Ala al-Din. As a Sunni, he says that he was asked by Saudi Imams to stay away more from Shi'is than from non-Muslims. Raheem was informed more about the first two caliphs than about 'Ali. It was only after he read *Then I was Guided*, written by a Tunisian who converted from Sunnism to Shi'ism (Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi), and after he spoke to several Shi'is that Raheem decided to accept Shi'ism. Another influential figure in his conversion process was Ammar Nakshawani, a charismatic Shi'i speaker whose eloquent deliveries and compelling arguments have inspired many to accept Shi'i Islam.

Another factor that invigorates Black Shi'is is the Shi'i chiliastic vision and accentuation of a just social order when the twelfth Imam (the Mahdi) appears. The concept resonates strongly with a familiar notion in the Black community – the second coming of Christ. The concept of a golden and just future under the guidance of an eschatological messianic figure is an ideal that many Blacks can readily identify with. Such an ideal soteriological vision of the future is missing in Sunni Islam whose concept of the golden era is rooted in the past rather than in the future.

Some of the observations made above are confirmed in a survey I conducted with Black Shi'is in 2000. When asked to write down the three most important reasons they had converted to Islam, eight converts replied they converted because of the doctrine of *tawhīd* (oneness of God) as opposed to that of the trinity. Other reasons cited were the political dimension of Islam, the structure of Islam, respect for and equality of women in Islam, fear of going to hell, and the sense of brotherhood prevalent in Islam. It is also significant to note that my survey indicates that some converts accepted Shi'ism due to the proliferation of Wahhabi-inspired literature and sermons that spoke of Shi'ism in a disparaging manner.¹⁴ Anti-Shi'i propaganda aroused their curiosity about this minority sect which allegedly threatened the fabric of the Muslim *umma*.

ETHNICITY WITHIN THE AMERICAN SHI‘I COMMUNITY

Tensions between immigrant Muslims and their black brethren are not new. When President Trump signed an executive order barring immigration from many Muslim countries in 2017, immigrant Muslims protested at airports and in many American cities. However, they were not joined by many Black Muslims since the latter were not directly impacted by the ban. Equally, when Blacks protest on city streets if a black person is shot by a policeman or to support rallies for ‘Black Lives Matter’, immigrants are largely absent. Despite their avowed unity, frictions between immigrant and Black Muslims surface frequently.

Such tensions are visible between American Shi‘is too. Tensions within the Shi‘i community are generated by conflicts between immigrants and non-immigrants, most of whom are converts. For many Black Shi‘is, acceptance of a new faith sparks a personal transformation, a foundation from which to generate a new understanding of the self. Their membership in the Shi‘i community should, in theory, empower them to overcome discrimination and prejudice. They also hope the Shi‘i community will facilitate their social integration with moral and religious support. In reality, having accepted Shi‘ism, Black Shi‘is in America face additional layers of discrimination. When they accept Shi‘ism, Black Shi‘is encounter Shi‘i communities which are often defined along ethnic lines. Many immigrants assemble in ‘ethnic mosques’ and establish close relations with the local ethnic community as a way of acculturating and adapting to America post-immigration. As an immigrant community establishes its own ethnic centres of worship, the local Shi‘i population becomes more estranged by ethnicity.

Immigrants assert their distinctive socio-cultural backgrounds as ‘the’ normative Islamic comportment. For many of them, anything alien to their expression of Islam is construed as alien to Islam itself. In the process, they alienate and marginalize Black converts. Converts’ religious practices are often judged against the homeland renditions of the faith, since the immigrant community reasserts ethnic divides that ‘bar Black converts from the privileges of equality integral to the purportedly color-blind faith.’¹⁵

Despite Islam’s universalistic and egalitarian ideology, Shi‘i Muslims frequently fail to practice this ideal. Instead, instances of overt racism are common, and ethnic differences, racial distinctions, and national affiliations fragment the American Shi‘i community. As Jan Mendes has correctly observed, ‘The immigrant ethnic majority safeguards its homeland’s cultures in the immediacy of adjusting to America’s unfamiliar nationhood; here, at the very least, the religious space is ethnically (and thus, recognizably) their own.’¹⁶

It is correct to state that as a racial minority within an ethnic and religious minority, Black Shi‘is are often ‘othered’ by fellow Shi‘is – thus marginalizing them to the fringes of the American Shi‘i community. Despite its idealistic vision of an egalitarian society based on the love of the Prophet and his family, ethnic and cultural considerations override the universal Shi‘i identity. Indeed, immigrant Shi‘is’ positioning as the dominant group empowers them to define and impose normative behaviour and praxis. Immigrants use ethnicity as an edict to create an ‘other’ and further organize power to define who the other is. Stated differently, the Shi‘is, who are ‘othered’ by the mainstream Sunni community, use ethnicity as a tool to create ‘the other’ within the Shi‘i community. It is not an exaggeration

to state that while shared religiosity may have reduced racial barriers, the pervading ethnic orientation in American Shi'ism has constructed other genres of obstacles.¹⁷

Black Shi'is' aspirations of spiritual fulfilment and a just social order are mitigated by the fact that, unlike in Sunni Islam, the overwhelming majority of American Shi'is are immigrants. Thus, Black Shi'is form but a fringe minority within the wide array of ethnic groups. It is important to remember that conversion is a process not an event. The convert needs continued communal and emotional support both before and after conversion. This is especially the case when a person transitions from Sunni to Shi'i Islam. On the one hand, s/he is demonized and neglected by his or her Sunni colleagues. On the other, the convert needs to learn the distinctive beliefs and practices of Shi'ism, find a suitable marriage partner, and gain emotional support from Shi'i community members. In most cases, Shi'i mosques do not offer such services.

The emergence of Shi'i places of worship in America can be traced to the 1980s after the influx of immigrants. These centres are run and administered by immigrants who determine the genre of programs to be held and what speakers to invite. Black Shi'is can attend but hardly participate in the programs. Hence, although the mosque doors are not closed to Black Shi'is, they are not completely open either. Since they are not represented at the administrative hierarchy in the mosques, Black Shi'i voices or concerns are rarely heard or addressed. Preachers in the mosques speak on issues pertaining to history, jurisprudence, ethics, and polemics rather than subjects that are germane to the Black community. These include topics like racism, poverty, isolation, drugs, estrangement from family members, integrating converts into the Shi'i community, ethnicity, and subjugation by the Black Sunni community.

Even though the Universal Muslim Association of America (UMAA), a national Shi'i body, has held annual conferences since 2002, so far not a single panel has been devoted to the cause of Black Shi'ism. The Muslim Congress, another national Shi'i institution, has been equally guilty of ignoring the plight of Black Shi'is. Neither has IMAM (Imam Mahdi Association of Marjaeya), which is located in Detroit and represents Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shi'i authority in the world, addressed the issue. In fact, the present author was the first speaker to address the topic of Black Shi'ism at a conference on Shi'i studies, held *at The Islamic College in London, England in May 2017*.

The lack of Shi'i proselytization activities is corroborated by my survey of converts. Fifty percent of those who converted to Shi'ism said they did so as a result of their own study whereas twenty five percent said it was because of someone else's persuasion. Significantly, not one interviewee said that they had been approached by a Shi'i institution. This further confirms my contention that when it comes to *da'wa* (proselytization), the Shi'i community has been largely passive and inert. It also indicates that conversion to Shi'ism is predicated on a convert's personal initiative rather than a product of outreach activities by the Shi'i community. It is not an exaggeration to state that in most instances, Blacks come to Shi'ism after conversion to Sunnism rather than coming directly to Shi'i Islam. This may partially explain Black Sunnis' anger and resentment at their Shi'i counterparts. They feel that having 'brothered' and supported them, Black Shi'is chose to become the other by espousing a 'heretical sect' of Islam.

My observations are corroborated by a survey of female Shi'i converts conducted by Inloes and Takim. The survey demonstrates that there is a need to understand the various layers of identities that Shi'i females have and how those are interpreted by others – whether it is their ethnic identity, blackness, Shi'i faith, or gender. They can and often are targeted for these identities – sometimes for all of them. Most of the respondents described 'a moderate to severe sense of exclusion from the Shi'i community for racial, cultural, and linguistic reasons...Respondents who had converted first to Sunnism and then to Shi'ism reported a much stronger sense of belonging among Sunnis.'¹⁸

The study continues:

In particular, Black women spoke of the pressure of adjusting to a quadruple minority status, as a minority (Blacks) within a minority (converts) within a minority (Shi'is) within a minority (Muslims) in North America. In addition to experiencing prejudice as Muslims – such as difficulties in finding a job or verbal harassment due to the hijab – many women also experienced prejudice from Sunnis. This multi-layered minority status was specifically identified as a major stressor.¹⁹

The findings of the survey corroborate the central thesis of this paper, that Black Shi'is, male or female, experience various levels of prejudice from both within and outside of the Shi'i community.

The study concludes that:

American and Canadian women convert to Shi'ism from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds which roughly mimic the ethnic and religious composition of America and Canada. Upon conversion, they usually experience a sense of social exclusion from both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims, and often experience difficulty learning more about their faith. Unlike female converts to Sunnism, female converts to Shi'ism cope with a multiple minority status arising from membership in several minority groups; Black women express the severest sense of marginalization.²⁰

It is to be further noted that for those who have converted, there are enormous social pressures to reject Shi'i Islam. Especially after the events of 9/11, many converts feel isolated as they are forced to abandon their family ties. They are also marginalized in the mosques as they do not fit within the framework of the ethnic centres. In response to the isolation they experience, in some American cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Rhode Island, Black Shi'is have chosen to establish their own mosques for their communities. It is in such institutions that they congregate for mutual support and shared experiences.

Black Shi'i marginalization does not end with their acceptance of Shi'ism. On the contrary, it can be argued that their sense of ostracization increases. They frequently experience racism and Islamophobia from the American white community, isolation from the Sunni Black community, rejection from their families, marginalization from the ethnic Shi'i community, and alienation in Shi'i places of worship where flagellation and other rituals which are peculiar to some cultures appear largely alien to the Black communities. More specifically, I refer to the multitudinous genres of flagellations (*latmiyya*) which are distinctive to

different Shi'i cultures. For example, in their centres, Khoja Shi'is circumambulate particular icons associated with Karbala when performing Muharram rituals whereas Pakistani men remove their shirts and strike their chests vociferously. Iranian Shi'i rituals, on the other hand, are more subdued. They evoke memories of Karbala by performing passion plays or other forms of chanting whereas some members of the Lebanese and Iraqi communities use swords, knives, and chains to strike parts of their bodies. Lamentations and recitations that accompany the rituals are performed in the language of the home country which Black Shi'is are not conversant with. Given the wide range of rituals enacted in the centres, Black Shi'is find it difficult to integrate with and blend into local Shi'i communities.

CHALLENGES FOR BLACK SHI'IS

Black Shi'is' position in the Islamic world is predicated on an effort to maintain their identity in the midst of a foreign mosque culture, particularly as immigrants influence numerous aspects of their social and religious lives. To assert this identity, there is a need for internal homogeneity and black leadership that will alleviate the marginalization that they face from their fellow Shi'is on the one hand, and from other Muslims on the other.

However, the rise of charismatic leaders like Elijah Mohammed or Malcolm X is almost impossible in American Shi'ism where the laity is required to follow the dictates and rulings of the *maraji'*, the religious leaders based in Iran and Iraq. The *maraji'* issue socio-religious edicts which are to be followed all over the world. Due to the hierarchical nature of religious leadership in Shi'ism, it is almost impossible for black charismatic leaders to emerge who can propagate views independent of or in contradistinction to the teachings of the *maraji'*. This is an important factor that hinders the rise of independent and charismatic Black leaders within the American Shi'i community. The Black religious leaders who have emerged and serve Shi'i communities have been trained in Qum and are largely reliant on the edicts of the *maraji'*. So far, none of them have attained the level of *ijtihad*, a status that would empower them to issue rulings independent of the traditional juristic figures to cater for the socio-political exigencies of Black Muslims. Hence, the sermons and teachings of the Black leaders have to be in strict conformity with the edicts of the Ayatollahs.

For the Black Shi'is, their shared identity, religious-racial marginality, and challenges should, theoretically, encourage them to unite and engender a sense of camaraderie towards one another. However, due to a dearth of financial resources and charismatic leadership within the Black Shi'i community, there has been little effort to bring them together. In addition, Black Shi'is are scattered in different parts of America with very little cohesive force. This exacerbates their sense of isolation. The establishment of Black Shi'i mosques can be an effective course for challenging anti-Black/anti-Islam prejudice, creating, in the process, a platform for Black Shi'i solidarity. They can discuss issues and initiate dialogue within the Black community that addresses their concerns, invigorating each other with the capacity to challenge or minimize the impact of extraneous forces.

These mosques can engender a 'convert culture', offering a Black Shi'i identity based on their racial and religious affiliations. A Black Shi'i identity can partially, alleviate a longing for self-affirmation by equipping themselves with both the 'cognitive space and a

recognizable socio-racial-cultural community wherein they can produce a refined notion of their personhood.²¹ It is in these centres that Black Shi'is can channel Black consciousness and ideology, aspiration and, at the same time, develop a conscious ideology that would distinguish them from Black Sunnis. It is here that they can affirm a Black self against an ethnic-mosque majority, the dominant Black Sunni community, the non-Muslim Black community, and a white society while simultaneously asserting the Black Shi'i identity.

The preceding discussion does not imply that the Black Shi'is will continuously accept marginalization or the gradations of identity. The youth, in particular, within the Black Shi'i community are more pro-active in negotiating their identity in multiple layers. Stated differently, the different layers of identity will impel Black Shi'i youth to navigate their way so as to redefine their boundaries and overcome isolation.²²

Like other youth, Black Shi'i youth live in a post-ethnic world. They negotiate and move between different ethnic, religious, national, and racial groups. Greater engagement with rather than separation from mainstream American culture has fostered the trans-ethnic phenomenon. Stated differently, Shi'i youth, black or otherwise, are engaged in the de-ethnicization of ethnic Islam, an Islam that is radically different from the one known to their parents.²³ On campuses and on social media, they choose to affiliate with Muslim or non-Muslim friends. This is an example of post-ethnicity rather than the ethnic-racial groups they are affiliated with by descent.²⁴

The process of de-ethnicization occurs within Shi'i youth groups in several ways. They connect with fellow Shi'is, Sunnis, and non-Muslims on campuses and school projects and work-places. De-ethnicization occurs especially on social media and the *ahl al-bayt* chat group where Shi'i youth from different ethnic backgrounds exchange views on a wide range of topics. Shi'i youth also use the Internet to transcend cultural peculiarities. Shi'i youth will visit, for example, *al-Islam.org*, a Shi'i site that speaks to many Shi'i issues. The site also has a large collection of online Islamic resources covering a variety of subjects in various media formats such as audio, video, presentations, image gallery, and short and full-length texts.²⁵ Social media in particular, offers much hope for the future generation of the Black Shi'i community for integration and acceptance within the Shi'i community.

SHI'ISM IN THE INCARCERATION FACILITIES

Black Shi'is in incarceration facilities report widespread discrimination from Sunni inmates. In my survey, many inmates stated that anti-Shi'i rhetoric by Wahhabi and Salafi inspired speakers precipitated their research into Shi'i beliefs and practices. Ironically, the curiosity of converts like the afore-mentioned Jamal Raheem has been aroused by the persistent attacks against and denigration of Shi'ism by Wahhabi-inspired proselytes and Imams. Raheem says that the chorus of negativity about Shi'ism made him more curious and interested in Shi'ism. After further exploration and research, he decided to embrace it.²⁶

Black Shi'is share the experience of conversion with Black Sunnis. They also face similar challenges. However, this is where their similarities end. They encounter prejudice from and even endure physical confrontation with fellow Black Muslims because of their acceptance of Shi'ism. By their conversion to Shi'ism, Black Shi'is become estranged from the Black

Sunni community. In all probability, this explains the numerous cases of violent behaviour reported by Black Shi'is in correctional facilities. In fact, many complain that they are abused and attacked more by Sunnis than by non-Muslims.

For Black Shi'i inmates, conversion to Shi'ism also means transitioning to a drastically different (and often smaller) social network. The assistance and support from Sunni brethren are replaced by that of a much smaller group of Shi'i inmates, most of whom have experienced some form of prejudice and discrimination themselves. Shi'i converts experience discrimination not only from non-Muslim inmates but also from Muslim ones.²⁷

A survey of inmates conducted in England showed that conversion to Islam emboldens them. According to the survey:

...‘weaker’ prisoners faced pressures to convert to Islam to secure the benefits of protection from a cohesive and self organised Muslim block within the prison, clearly reminiscent of Jacobs’ (1979) importation accounts of black collectivity in US prisons. Jonathon, for instance, a White British prisoner at Rochester was convinced that religion would trump race if he converted, insisting that ‘if I’m vulnerable, [if] I’m white, doesn’t matter my colour, it doesn’t matter anything...[because] if I turn Muslim half of the population of the jail can’t touch me because I’ve got half of the jail which are also Muslim on my side.’²⁸

The experience of Black Shi'is is very different. They transition from a position of strength to that of weakness. In a survey of Shi'i inmates that I conducted in the early 2000s, they cited the following grievances:

- Denied right of being a Muslim by non-Shi'i brothers (e.g. can't vote for a leader, can't hold positions in mosques)
- No access to Shi'i learning material
- Sunni brothers turning their backs in times of difficulty
- To non-Muslims, a Shi'i is a stereotype of ‘suicidal terrorist’
- Accused of trying to assassinate a Sunni Amir
- Sunnis providing most classes, for adults and children; the Sunni pre-occupation with ‘A’isha hadiths; Sunni attitude of righteousness
- Being considered a ‘radical’ minority within a minority

The challenges that many Black Shi'is often face are epitomized to some degree by the story of Shaheed Abdur Rahman. I have been in touch with him on a personal level for twenty-five years and can vouch for his struggles. Shaheed was incarcerated for almost thirty years during which time he converted to Shi'ism. For him, in Shi'ism, he ‘finally found something that belonged to us.’²⁹ This corroborates my observation that many Blacks feel a sense of belonging in Shi'ism. While he was incarcerated, he wrote, ‘It is hard to create a picture for you to see the hell I had to endure so that I may practice my faith. Even now, the Wahhabi chaplains and prison officials are trying to keep me quiet and prevent me from making my brothers and sisters aware of what’s going on with me.’³⁰ Shaheed says he was often attacked by Sunni inmates for having accepted Shi'ism and had to eventually appeal to the Federal Court for the right to practice his faith. He complains that he was shunned

by both the Sunnis and Shi'is. He states, 'I recall writing to a Shi'a community seeking help and was told no because I was in prison.'

After being released from prison in 2017, Shaheed realized there are very few resources that can help those coming home from prison. He went to a few different Shi'i mosques in New York. He states:

I went seeking help with employment and housing and got no help at all. I recently lost my job and went to this *masjid* on 96th street and was denied help because I am Shi'a. I went to another well-known Shi'a *masjid* needing help and was only offered a book. Dr Takim came down from Canada just to give me encouragement. It is not easy. I am homeless right now living in the Keener men's shelter on Wards Island....³¹

Due to the experience he endured, he practices his faith privately.

Stories such as these are not new for Black Shi'is. Acrimonious relationships and hostilities with Black Sunnis mean that Black Muslims are against rather than with each other in the struggle to assert their identity and fight for socio-economic justice in America. Black Sunnis do not see a comrade in the struggle against racism and Islamophobia when they gaze into the face of a Black Shi'i; instead, they perceive a hostile and aberrant 'other'.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on the multiple marginalities that a racially, ethnic, and religiously minoritized group like the Black Shi'is experience. Despite having to cope with multiple identities of Black, Muslim, and Shi'i, amidst a hostile and, at times, condescending milieu, there are many factors that motivate Black Americans to affirm allegiance to Shi'i Islam. Besides immigration and the other factors outlined above, the social media, the Wahhabi anti-Shi'i rhetoric, and increasing literature on Shi'ism have made Shi'ism a distinctly American phenomenon. Many in the Black community have viewed Shi'ism not as an aberration from mainstream Islam but as an alternative affirmation of normative Islam.

Since the 1980s, there has been a gradual but steady increase in the number of Blacks converting to Shi'ism both inside and outside the correctional facilities. The interplay of multiple layers of identities that minoritized groups carry have shaped and moulded the stigmatization, discrimination, and challenges they experience. The cumulative forms of oppression conjoined with the multiple identities simultaneously held demonstrate that Black Shi'is will continue to encounter multiple challenges. At the same time, they have an opportunity to assert their agency in the face of multiple oppressive systems and ideologies.

NOTES

1. Besides the Black Shi'is, there are many Caucasians who have accepted Twelver Shi'ism. Their stories and experiences have yet to be told.
2. Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: NYU Press, 1998).

3. See Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), chapter one. Also 'Preserving or Extending Boundaries? The Black Shi'is of America', *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2010): 237–249.
4. One of the earliest mosques in America was built by the Shi'i community in Michigan City in 1924. See Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America*, 12–13.
5. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 'American Foreign Policy in the Middle East and Its Impact on the Identity of Arab Muslims in the United States,' in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22.
6. On the close relationship between Warith al-Din and Saudi Arabia see Robert Dannin, 'Understanding the Multi-Ethnic Dilemma', in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito ([Florida]: University of South Florida, 1998), 333; also 356 fn. 9.
7. Abbas Aghdassi and Seyed Mohammad Marandi, 'African American Twelver Shia Community of New York', in *Sociology of Islam* 6 (2018), 39. *Nahj al-Balagha* is a compilation of 'Ali b. Abi Talib's sermons, letters, and statements compiled by Sharif al-Radi in the eleventh century.
8. Rod Earle and Coretta Phillips, "Muslim is the new black" – new ethnicities and new essentialisms in the prison', in *Race and Justice* 3, no. 2 (2013): 114–129.
9. For a further discussion on this, see Liyakat Takim, *Preserving or Extending*, 240–241.
10. Michelle D. Byng, 'Mediating Discrimination: Resisting Oppression among African-American Muslim Women', in *Social Problems* 45, no. 4 (1998), 474.
11. Michelle D. Byng, 'Mediating Discrimination', 474.
12. Confirmed in email correspondence in 2008.
13. See <<http://www.islamifc.org/test/index.php>>.
14. Liyakat Takim, 'Preserving or Extending', 243–244.
15. See Liyakat Takim, 'Shi'ite Muslims', in *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100–118; Jan-Therese Mendes, 'Exploring Blackness from Muslim, Female, and Canadian Realities: Founding Selfhood, (Re)claiming Identity and Negotiating Belongingness within/against a Hostile Nation' (MA Thesis, McMaster University, 2011), 55.
16. Jan-Therese Mendes, 'Exploring Blackness', 69.
17. For an in-depth discussion on the ethnic factor in American Shi'ism and the impact this has on the Black community see Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America*, chapters two and five.
18. Amina Inloes and Liyakat Takim, 'Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Female Converts to Shi'ism in the United States and Canada', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (2014), 16.
19. *Ibid.*, 15.
20. *Ibid.*, 16.
21. Jan-Therese Mendes, 'Exploring Blackness', 30.
22. Abbas Aghdassi and Seyed Mohammad Marandi, 'African American Twelver Shia Community', 41.
23. Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America*, 84–6.
24. Karen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* (New York: Russell Sage, 2003), 125.
25. On Shi'i internet sites, see Abdul Hamid Lotfi, 'Spreading the Word: Communicating Islam in America', in *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2002), 22, fn. 42. For other internet sites, see Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America*, chapter two.
26. Based on a telephone conversation in November 2018.
27. Liyakat Takim, 'Preserving or Extending Boundaries', 244.
28. Rod Earle and Coretta Phillips, "Muslim is the new black", 114–129.

29. Based on an email sent on 20 April 2020.
30. Liyakat Takim, *Shī'ism in America*, 130.
31. Ibid.