

March 11, 2007

Between Black and Immigrant Muslims, an Uneasy Alliance

By [ANDREA ELLIOTT](#)

Under the glistening dome of a mosque on Long Island, hundreds of men sat cross-legged on the floor. Many were doctors and engineers born in Pakistan and India. Dressed in khakis, polo shirts and the odd silk tunic, they fidgeted and whispered.

One thing stood between them and dinner: A visitor from Harlem was coming to ask for money.

A towering black man with a gray-flecked beard finally swept into the room, his bodyguard trailing him. Wearing a long, embroidered robe and matching hat, he took the microphone and began talking about a different group of Muslims, the thousands of African-Americans who have found Islam in prison.

“We are all brothers and sisters,” said the visitor, known as Imam Talib.

The men stared. To some of them, it seemed, he was from another planet. As the imam returned their gaze, he had a similar sensation. “They live in another world,” he later said.

Only 28 miles separate Imam Talib’s mosque in Harlem from the Islamic Center of Long Island. The congregations they each serve — African-Americans at the city mosque and immigrants of South Asian and Arab descent in the suburbs — represent the largest Muslim populations in the United States. Yet a vast gulf divides them, one marked by race and class, culture and history.

For many African-American converts, Islam is an experience both spiritual and political, an expression of empowerment in a country they feel is dominated by a white elite. For many immigrant Muslims, Islam is an inherited identity, and America a place of assimilation and prosperity.

For decades, these two Muslim worlds remained largely separate. But last fall, Imam Talib hoped to cross that distance in a venture that has become increasingly common since Sept. 11. Black Muslims have begun advising immigrants on how to mount a civil rights campaign. Foreign-born Muslims are giving African-Americans roles of leadership in some of their largest organizations. The two groups have joined forces politically, forming coalitions and backing the same candidates.

It is a tentative and uneasy union, seen more typically among leaders at the pulpit than along the prayer line. But it is critical, a growing number of Muslims believe, to surviving a hostile new era.

“Muslims will not be successful in America until there is a marriage between the indigenous and immigrant communities,” said Siraj Wahhaj, an African-American imam in New York with a rare national following among immigrant Muslims. “There has to be a marriage.”

The divide between black and immigrant Muslims reflects a unique struggle facing Islam in America. Perhaps nowhere else in the world are Muslims from so many racial, cultural and theological backgrounds trying their hands at coexistence. Only in Mecca, during the obligatory hajj, or pilgrimage, does such diversity in the faith come to life, between black and white, rich and poor, Sunni and Shiite.

“This is a new experiment in the history of Islam,” said Ali S. Asani, a professor of Islamic studies at [Harvard University](#).

That evening in October, Imam Al-Hajj Talib ‘Abdur-Rashid drove to Westbury, on Long Island, with a task he would have found unthinkable years ago.

He would ask for donations from the immigrant community he refers to, somewhat bitterly, as the “Muslim elite.”

But he needed funds, and the doors of immigrant mosques seemed to be opening. Imam Talib and other African-American leaders had formed a national “indigenous Muslim” organization, and he knew that during the holy month of Ramadan, the Islamic Center of Long Island could raise thousands of dollars in an evening.

It is a place where BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes fill the parking lot, and Coach purses are perched along prayer lines.

In Harlem, many of Imam Talib's congregants get to the mosque by bus or subway, and warm themselves with space heaters in a drafty, brick building.

Before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, Imam Talib had only a distant connection to the Islamic Center of Long Island. In passing, he had met Faroque Khan, an Indian-born doctor who helped found the mosque, but the two had little in common.

Imam Talib, 56, is a thundering prison chaplain whose mosque traces its roots to Malcolm X. He is a first-generation Muslim.

Dr. Khan, 64, is a mild-mannered pulmonologist who collects Chinese antiques and learned to ski on the slopes of Vermont. He is a first-generation American.

But in the turmoil that followed Sept. 11, the imam and the doctor found themselves unexpectedly allied.

"The more separate we stay, the more targeted we become," Dr. Khan said.

Each man recognizes what the other has to offer. African-Americans possess a cultural and historical fluency that immigrants lack, said Dr. Khan; they hold an unassailable place in America from which to defend their faith.

For Imam Talib, immigrants provide a crucial link to the Muslim world and its tradition of scholarship, as well as the wisdom that comes with an "unshattered Islamic heritage."

Both groups have their practical virtues, too. African-Americans know better how to mobilize in America, both men say, and immigrants tend to have deeper pockets.

Still, it is one thing to talk about unity, Imam Talib said, and another to give it life. Before his visit to Long Island last fall, he had never asked Dr. Khan and his mosque to match their rhetoric with money.

"You have to have a litmus test," he said.

One Faith, Many Histories

Imam Talib and Dr. Khan did not warm to each other when they met in May 2000, at a gathering in Chicago of Muslim leaders.

The imam found the silver-haired doctor faintly smug and paternalistic. It was an attitude he had often whiffed from well-to-do immigrant Muslims. Dr. Khan found Imam Talib straightforward to the point of bluntness.

The uneasy introduction was, for both men, emblematic of the strained relationship between their communities.

Imam Talib and other black Muslims trace their American roots to the arrival of Muslims from West Africa as slaves in the South. That historical link gave rise to Islam-inspired movements in the 20th century, the most significant of which was the [Nation of Islam](#).

The man who founded the Nation in 1930, W. D. Fard, spread the message that American blacks belonged to a lost Muslim tribe and were superior to the “white, blue-eyed devils” in their midst. Under Mr. Fard’s successor, Elijah Muhammad, the Nation flourished in the 1960s amid the civil rights struggle and the emergence of a black-separatist movement.

Overseas, Islamic scholars found the group’s teachings on race antithetical to the faith. The schism narrowed after 1975, when Mr. Muhammad’s son Warith Deen Mohammed took over the Nation, bringing it in line with orthodox Sunni Islam. [Louis Farrakhan](#) parted ways with Mr. Mohammed — taking the Nation’s name and traditional teachings with him — but the majority of African-American adherents came to embrace the same Sunni practice that dominates the Muslim world.

Still, divisions between African-American and immigrant Muslims remained pronounced long after the first large waves of South Asians and Arabs arrived in the United States in the 1960s.

Today, of the estimated six million Muslims who live in the United States, about 25 percent are African-American, 34 percent are South Asian and 26 percent are Arab, said John Zogby, a pollster who has studied the American Muslim population.

“Given the extreme from which we came, I would say that the immigrant Muslims have been brotherly toward us,” Warith Deen Mohammed, who has the largest following of African-American Muslims, said in an interview. “But I think they’re more skeptical than they admit they are. I think they feel more comfortable with their own than they feel with us.”

For many African-Americans, conversion to Islam has meant parting with mainstream culture, while Muslim immigrants have tended toward assimilation. Black converts often take Arabic names, only to find foreign-born Muslims introducing themselves as “Moe” instead of “Mohammed.”

The tensions are also economic. Like Dr. Khan, many Muslim immigrants came to the United States with advanced degrees and quickly prospered, settling in the suburbs. For decades, African-Americans watched with frustration as immigrants sent donations to causes overseas, largely ignoring the problems of poor Muslims in the United States.

Imam Talib found it impossible to generate interest at immigrant mosques in the 1999 police shooting of [Amadou Diallo](#), who was Muslim. “What we’ve found is when domestic issues jump up, like police brutality, all the sudden we’re by ourselves,” he said.

Some foreign-born Muslims say they are put off by the racial politics of many black converts. They struggle to understand why African-American Muslims have been reluctant to meet with law enforcement officials in the wake of Sept. 11. For their part, black Muslim leaders complain that immigrants have failed to learn their history, which includes a pattern of [F.B.I.](#) surveillance dating back to the roots of the Nation of Islam.

The ironies are, at times, stinging.

“From the immigrant community, I hear that African-Americans have to learn how to work in the system,” said Nihad Awad, the executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations, adding that this was not his personal opinion.

At the heart of the conflict is a question of leadership. Much to the ire of African-Americans, many immigrants see themselves as the rightful

leaders of the faith in America by virtue of their Islamic schooling and fluency in Arabic, the original language of the Koran.

“What does knowing Arabic have to do with the quality of your prayer, your fast, your relationship with God?” asked Ihsan Bagby, an associate professor of Islamic studies at the [University of Kentucky](#) in Lexington. “But African-Americans have to ask themselves why have they not learned more in these years.”

Every year in Chicago, the two largest Muslim conventions in the country — one sponsored by an immigrant organization and the other by Mr. Mohammed’s — take place on the same weekend, in separate parts of the city.

The long-simmering tension boiled over into a public rift with the 2000 presidential elections. That year, a powerful coalition of immigrant Muslims endorsed [George W. Bush](#) (because of a promise to stop the profiling of Arabs).

The nation’s most prominent African-American Muslims complained that they were never consulted. The following summer, when Imam Talib vented his frustration at a meeting with immigrant leaders in Washington, a South Asian man turned to him, he recalled, and said, “I don’t understand why all of you African-American Muslims are always so angry about everything.”

Imam Talib searched for an answer he thought the man could understand.

“African-Americans are like the Palestinians of this land,” he finally said. “We’re not just some angry black people. We’re legitimately outraged and angry.”

The room fell silent.

Soon after, black leaders announced the creation of the Muslim Alliance in North America, their first national “indigenous” organization.

But the fallout over the elections was soon eclipsed by Sept. 11, when Muslim immigrants found themselves under intense public scrutiny. They began complaining about “profiling” and “flying while brown,” appropriating language that had been largely the domain of African-Americans.

It was around this time that Dr. Khan became, as he put it, enlightened. A few weeks before the terrorist attacks, he read the book “Black Rage,” by William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs. The book, published in 1968, explores the psychological woes of African-Americans, and how the impact of racism is carried through generations.

“It helped me understand that even before you’re born, things that happened a hundred years ago can affect you,” Dr. Khan said. “That was a big change in my thinking.”

He sent an e-mail message to fellow Muslims, including Imam Talib, sharing what he had learned.

The Harlem imam was pleased, if not yet convinced.

“I just encouraged the brother to keep going,” Imam Talib said.

An Oasis in Harlem

One windswept night in Harlem, cars rolled past the corner of West 113th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. A police siren blared as men huddled by a neon-lit Laundromat.

Across the street stood a brown brick building, lifeless from the outside. But upstairs, in a cozy carpeted room, rows of men and women chanted.

“Ya Hakim. Ya Allah.” O wise one. O God.

Imam Talib led the chant, swathed in a black satin robe. It was Ramadan’s holiest evening, the Night of Power. As the voices died down, he spotted his bodyguard swaying.

“Take it easy there, Captain,” Imam Talib said. “As long as you don’t jump and shout it’s all right.”

Laughter trickled through the mosque, where a translucent curtain separated men in skullcaps from women in African-print gowns.

“We’re just trying to be ourselves, you know?” Imam Talib said. “Within the tradition.”

“That’s right,” said one woman.

The imam continued: “And we can’t let other people, from other cultures, come and try to make us clones of them. We came here as Muslims.”

He was feeling drained. He had just returned from the Manhattan Detention Complex, where he works as a chaplain. Some of the mosque’s men were back in jail.

“We need power,” he said quietly. “Without that, we’ll destroy ourselves.”

Since its birth in 1964, the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood has been a fortress of stubborn faith, persevering through the crack wars, welfare, [AIDS](#), gangs, unemployment, diabetes, broken families and gentrification.

The mosque was founded in a Brooklyn apartment by Shaykh-‘Allama Al-Hajj K. Ahmad Tawfiq, a follower of Malcolm X. The Sunni congregation boomed in the 1970s, starting a newspaper and opening a school and a health food store.

With city loans, it bought its current building. Fourteen families moved in, creating a bold Muslim oasis in a landscape of storefront churches and liquor stores. The mosque claimed its corner by drenching the sidewalk in dark green paint, the color associated with Islam.

The paint has since faded. The school is closed. Many of the mosque’s members can no longer afford to live in a neighborhood where brownstones sell for millions of dollars.

But an aura of dignity prevails. The women normally pray one floor below the men, in a scrubbed, tidy room scented with incense. Their bathroom is a shrine of gold curtains and lavender soaps. A basket of nylon roses hides a hole in the wall.

Most of the mosque’s 160 members belong to the working class, and up to a third of the men are former convicts.

Some congregants are entrepreneurs, professors, writers and musicians. Mos Def and Q-Tip have visited with Imam Talib, who carries the nickname “hip-hop imam.”

Mosque celebrations are a blend of Islam and Harlem. In October, at the end of Ramadan, families feasted on curried chicken and collard greens, grilled fish and candied yams.

Just before the afternoon prayer, a lean man in a black turtleneck rose to give the call. He was [Yusef Salaam](#), whose conviction in the Central Park jogger case was later overturned.

Many of the mosque's members embraced Islam in search of black empowerment, not black separatism. They describe racial equality as a central tenet of their faith. Yet for some, the promise of Islam has been at odds with the reality of Muslims.

One member, Aqilah Mu'Min, lives in the Parkchester section of the Bronx, a heavily Bangladeshi neighborhood. Whenever she passes women in head scarves, she offers the requisite Muslim greeting. Rarely is it returned. "We have a theory that says Islam is perfect, human beings are not," said Ms. Mu'Min, a city fraud investigator.

It was the simplicity of Islam that drew Imam Talib.

Raised a Christian, he spent the first part of his youth in segregated North Carolina. As a teenager, he read "The Autobiography of [Malcolm X](#)" twice. He began educating himself about the faith at age 19, when as an aspiring actor he was cast in a play about a man who had left the Nation of Islam.

But his conversion was more spiritual than political, he said.

"I'd like to think that even if I was a white man, I'd still be a Muslim because that's the orientation of my soul," the imam said.

He has learned some Arabic, and traveled once to the Middle East, for hajj. Yet he feels more comfortable with the Senegalese and Guinean Muslims who have settled in Harlem than with many Arabs and South Asians.

He is trying to reach out, but is often disappointed.

In November, he accepted a last-minute invitation to meet with hundreds of immigrants at the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, an opulent mosque on East 96th Street.

The group, the Coalition for Muslim School Holidays, was trying to persuade the city to recognize two Muslim holidays on the school calendar. The effort, Imam Talib learned, had been nearly a year in the making, and no African-American leaders had been consulted.

He was stunned. After all, he had led a similar campaign in the 1980s, resulting in the suspension of alternate-side parking for the same holidays.

“They are unaware of the foundations upon which they are standing,” he said.

Backlash in the Suburbs

Brush Hollow Road winds through a quiet stretch of Long Island, past churches and diners and leafy cul-de-sacs. In this tranquil tableau, the Islamic Center of Long Island announces itself proudly, a Moorish structure of white concrete topped by a graceful dome.

Sleek sedans and S.U.V.’s circle the property as girls with Barbie backpacks hop out and scurry to the Islamic classes they call “Sunday school.”

It is a testament to America’s influence on the mosque that its liveliest time of the week is not Friday, Islam’s holy day, but Sunday.

Boys in hooded sweatshirts smack basketballs along the pavement by a sign that reads “No pray, no play.” Young mothers in Burberry coats exchange kisses and chatter.

For members of the mosque — many of whom work in Manhattan and cannot make the Friday prayer — Sunday is the day to reflect and connect.

The treasurer, Rizwan Qureshi, frantically greeted drivers one Sunday morning with a flier advertising a fund-raiser.

“We’re trying to get [Barack Obama](#),” Mr. Qureshi, a banker born in Karachi, told a woman in a gold-hued BMW.

“We need some real money,” he called out to another driver.

The mosque began with a group of doctors, engineers and other professionals from Pakistan and India who settled in Nassau County in the early 1970s.

“Our kids would come home from school and say, ‘Where is my Christmas tree, my Hanukkah lights?’ ” recalled Dr. Khan, who lives in nearby Jericho. “We didn’t want them to grow up unsure of who they are.”

Since opening in 1993, the mosque has thrived, with assets now valued at more than \$3 million. Hundreds of people pray there weekly, and thousands come on Muslim holidays.

The mosque has an unusually modern, democratic air. Men and women worship with no partition between them. A different scholar delivers the Friday sermon every week, in English.

Perhaps most striking, a majority of female worshipers do not cover their heads outside the mosque.

“I think it’s important to find the fine line between the religion and the age in which we live,” said Nasreen Wasti, 43, a contract analyst for Lufthansa. “I’m sure I will have to answer to God for not covering myself. But I’m also satisfied by many of the good deeds I am doing.”

She and other members use words like “progressive” to describe their congregation. But after Sept. 11, a different image took hold.

In October 2001, a Newsday article quoted a member of the mosque as asking “who really benefits from such a horrible tragedy that is blamed on Muslims and Arabs?” A co-president of the mosque was also quoted saying that Israel “would benefit from this tragedy.”

Conspiracy theories about Sept. 11 have long circulated among Muslims, and Dr. Khan had heard discussion among congregants. Such talk, he said, was the product of two forces: a deep mistrust of America’s motives in the Middle East and a refusal, among many Muslims, to engage in self-criticism.

“You blame the other guy for your own shortcomings,” said Dr. Khan.

He visited synagogues and churches after the article ran, reassuring audiences that the comments did not reflect the official position of the mosque, which condemned the attacks.

But to Congressman Peter T. King, whose district is near the mosque, that condemnation fell short. He began publicly criticizing Dr. Khan, asserting that he had failed to fully denounce the statements made by the men.

“He’s definitely a radical,” Mr. King said of Dr. Khan in an interview. “You cannot, in the context of Sept. 11, allow those statements to be made and not be a radical.”

When asked about Mr. King’s comments, Dr. Khan replied proudly, “I thought we had freedom of speech.”

It hardly seems possible that Mr. King and Dr. Khan were once friends.

Mr. King used to dine at Dr. Khan’s home. He attended the wedding of Dr. Khan’s son, Arif, in 1995. At the mosque’s opening, it was Mr. King who cut the ribbon.

After Sept. 11, the mosque experienced the sort of social backlash felt by Muslims around the country. Anonymous callers left threatening messages, and rocks were hurled at children from passing cars.

The attention waned over time. But Mr. King cast a new light on the mosque in 2004 with the release of his novel “Vale of Tears.”

In the novel, terrorists affiliated with a Long Island mosque demolish several buildings, killing hundreds of people. One of the central characters is a Pakistani heart surgeon whose friendship with a congressman has grown tense.

“By inference, it’s me,” Dr. Khan said of the Pakistani character. (Mr. King said it was a “composite character” based on several Muslims he knows.)

For Dr. Khan, his difficulties after Sept. 11 come as proof that Muslims cannot stay fragmented. “It’s a challenge for the whole Muslim community — not just for me,” he said. “United we stand, divided we fall.”

The Litmus Test

Imam Talib and his bodyguard set off to Westbury before dusk on Oct. 14. They passed a fork on the Long Island Expressway, and the imam peered out the window. None of the signs were familiar.

He checked his watch and saw that he was late, adding to his unease. He had visited the mosque a few times before, but never felt entirely at home.

“I’m conscious of being a guest,” he said. “They treat me kindly and nicely. But I know where I am.”

At the Islamic Center of Long Island, Dr. Khan was also getting nervous. Hundreds of congregants had gathered after fasting all day for Ramadan. The scent of curry drifted mercilessly through the mosque.

Dr. Khan sprang to his feet and took the microphone. He improvised.

“All of us need to learn from and understand the contributions of the Muslim indigenous community,” he said. “Starting with Malcolm X.”

It had been six years since Imam Talib and Dr. Khan first encountered each other in Chicago. Back then, Imam Talib rarely visited immigrant mosques, and Dr. Khan had only a peripheral connection to African-American Muslims.

In the 1980s, the doctor had become aware of the high number of Muslim inmates while working as the chief of medicine for a hospital in Nassau County that oversaw health care at the county prison. His mosque began donating prayer rugs, Korans and skullcaps to prisoners around the country. But his interaction with black Muslim leaders was limited until Sept. 11.

After Dr. Khan read the book “Black Rage,” he and Imam Talib began serving together on the board of a new political task force. Finally, in 2005, Dr. Khan invited the imam to his mosque to give the Friday sermon.

That February, Imam Talib rose before the Long Island congregation. Blending verses in the Koran with passages from recent American history, he urged the audience to learn from the civil rights movement.

Dr. Khan listened raptly. Afterward, over sandwiches, he asked Imam Talib for advice. He wanted to thaw the relationship between his mosque and African-American mosques on Long Island. The conversation continued for hours.

“The real searching for an answer, searching for a solution, was coming from Dr. Khan,” said Imam Talib. “I could just feel it.”

Dr. Khan began inviting more African-American leaders to speak at his mosque, and welcomed Imam Talib there last October to give a fund-raising pitch for his organization, the Muslim Alliance in North America. The group had recently announced a “domestic agenda,” with programs to help ex-convicts find housing and jobs and to standardize premarital counseling for Muslims in America.

After the imam arrived that evening and spoke, he sat on the floor next to a blazer-clad Dr. Khan. As they feasted on kebabs, the doctor made a pitch of his own: The teenagers of his mosque could spend a day at Imam Talib’s mosque, as the start of a youth exchange program. The imam nodded slowly.

Minutes later, the mosque’s president, Habeeb Ahmed, hurried over. The congregants had so far pledged \$10,000.

“Alhamdulillah,” the imam said. Praise be to God.

It was the most Imam Talib had raised for his group in one evening.

As the dinner drew to a close, the imam looked for his bodyguard. They had a long drive home and he did not want to lose his way again.

Dr. Khan asked Imam Talib how he had gotten lost.

“Inner city versus the suburbs,” the imam replied a bit testily.

Then he smiled.

“The only thing it proves,” he said, “is that I need to come by here more often.”

Black Muslims (including people of immigrant background, like Nigerians and Senegalese) are roughly a quarter of all Muslims in America. Today, you'll see that many prominent pro-Black figures are African-American Muslims (Dave Chappelle, Kareem Abdul-Jabar, Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, Tech N9ne, Q-Tip, Mike Tyson, Rakim, Busta Rhymes, etc.) as well as prominent Black Muslims from immigrant backgrounds (Akon, Hakeem Olajuwon, etc), but they generally engage with wider society as Blacks who are. edit: There's a 2007 article in the NYT called "Between Black and Immigrant Muslims, an Uneasy Alliance". One of the issues is how they see politics differently--the touchstones are still the Civil Rights Movement for one and 9/11 for the other.