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Comparing the Mosques to New York City's Ethnic and Social Clubs

American Voluntary Associations and the Mosque During his travels around America in the 1830s, Alexis de Toqueville, a French aristocrat, noted a proliferation of social and civic organizations in the new world. In his book that recounts these voyages, *Democracy in America*, he wrote: "In no country of the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America."¹ He observed that though monarchies may rely upon the exertions of a wealthy and powerful individual to achieve monumental undertakings, "among democratic nations all the citizens are independent and feeble, powerless if they do not help one another" (p. 115). Toqueville concluded that "the art of associations becomes the mother of action," (p. 116) especially in a democratic society which must now artificially create and nurture social and gregarious groupings. What was a characteristic pattern of nineteenth century American life established by early immigrants and noted by Toqueville continues to be reflected in the hometown societies, mutual aid, and immigrant fraternal organizations of New York City in the post-1965 period when changes in the immigration laws encouraged the latest influx. Among contemporary New York City's immigrant population, diverse ethnic groups often choose to institutionalize their own associations by providing an architectural setting within which they may pursue either political (i.e. instrumental) or leisure-time (i.e. expressive) activities. New York City's social and ethnic clubs have traditionally provided a metaphorical "home" in which and in reference to which diverse immigrant groups have, through various recreational activities, organized their social and cultural adaptations to a strange, and often estranging urban environment. Sicilian hometown clubs and Greek fraternal associations, as examples of ethnic and social clubs,

are housed in numerous single family homes, lofts, and storefronts scattered throughout the districts of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and Astoria, Queens respectively.²

An additional urban example of an architectural form associated with a newer "ethnic" group is the mosque. I have argued elsewhere that Muslims in New York City are perceived by New Yorkers as another ethnic minority in our colorful urban mosaic, despite Muslim self-assertions of belonging to a religious grouping. I conjectured that in relation to the annual "Muslim World Day Parade," a festive display and march down Lexington Avenue each September, Muslims of New York City, in order to attain political and economic power, are reconfiguring religion into ethnicity to take advantage of the discourse of ethnicity.³ This is because both the march of the "Muslim World Day Parade" and "storefront" mosques are collective activities that construct and present images of Islam in the city to non-Muslim New Yorkers.

A storefront mosque comes under the rubric of "non-pedigreed architecture," a label designating the "vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous constructions of the informal, undocumented sector."⁴ By examining buildings devoted to Islam, we gain insight into specific political and organizational activities that promote symbolic modes of expression for an emerging Muslim community. At the same time, to renovate, maintain or even construct a mosque requires that an association of people articulate the task of developing together certain common interests based on respect for the thing they love (according to the famous formulation of Toqueville). Then from this basic fact of human social existence, a voluntary association is formed. Moreover, a voluntary association is not only a group of people organized for a common purpose and brought about by the will of its individual members, but it is also a group of people acting independently of government imposition.

Similarly, what characterizes the establishment of a mosque is a

group of people sharing the same religious beliefs who freely choose to pray together. Art historian Renata Holod has described the minimum architectural requirements of a mosque for an embryonic community: there must be an oriented wall, a shaded area and a large unencumbered space for overflow. Holod then distinguishes between this primordial moment of the community (or umma) when all Muslims stand together versus the historical moment of constructing a building.⁵ In the case of the contemporary historical moment — the era when storefront mosques have emerged in America — if we imagine Muslims as a voluntary association (in the manner of Toqueville and his appreciation of an American grassroots gregariousness), the mosque interpreted as a voluntary association conforms to patterns of sociability and interaction that already shaped the experience of nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrant social and ethnic clubs. Therefore, the storefront mosque also embodies its very presence in an architectural form for two reasons, one responding to tradition, and the other, to urban America: a mosque is not only the Muslim community's expression of presence but a mosque also satisfies the need experienced by Muslim immigrants in New York City to serve their sociable ends characteristically promoted among other ethnic groups by voluntary associations, fraternal societies and social clubs. Like the building itself, the association of people who build, inhabit, and decorate a mosque is subject to a cycle that describes the history of Muslim immigration to New York City. The mosque emerges from an urbanite existence in which the bonds of extended family are weakened, while at the same time the effects of immigration and urbanization register on immigrant Muslim communities and their respective expres-

sive cultures. As an example of the aspirations of many immigrant Muslims who have organized mosques in America, an article written by Levent Akbarut best articulates the complex forces propelling the proliferation of mosques, first as "storefront" renovations, eventually as purposeful architectural constructions. Akbarut's thoughts appeared in the November-December issue of *The Minaret*, a widely circulating newspaper based in Orange County California. When the author discusses the role of the mosque in America, he employs terms which substitute traditional, involuntary kin groups, such as family, with new, city-based, created communities that reproduce a semblance of kinship ties. Akbarut argues that the American mosque needs to be a school because urban schools are substandard, a community center because the streets are dangerous, and a locus of political activity, such as voter registration drives, so that Muslims will have a say in the decision-making processes of this country. Quoting a saying or hadith from Al-Bukhari, the author acknowledges that "a mosque within the confines of four walls and a ceiling is not a requirement for a Muslim community to offer prayer, because God has made the whole earth a sanctuary for worship." Why then, he asks, did the Prophet build a mosque during the Medinan era? The answer is that the mosque functioned as a center for Islamic affairs and organization and thereby nurtured the Islamic effort. This example should be kept in mind by Muslims seeking to establish Islam in America.⁶ Creating a Mosque in the Bronx: Sunnat-ul-Jamaat⁷ What Akbarut envisions as the future of the mosque in America is reflected in aspirations shared by the founders of one mosque, Sunnat-ul-Jamaat of the Bronx. Their mosque is an example of transforming a structure designed for other purposes into an acceptable mosque. At the same time, such a Muslim place of prayer functions consciously according to a model outlined for voluntary associations or social and ethnic clubs: new relationships and associations linked to urban American societies have been adapted from traditional settings and patterns. For

example, the exterior structure of the mosque exhibits the same architecture as the surrounding three-story townhouses. In its interior, the mosque exhibits a sharp contrast to surrounding homes and buildings whose individual, private apartments discourage the sociability and circulation of people involved in a communal religious event. The entrance to the mosque is marked as sacred space by a sign in English and Arabic: "O God, open to me your doors of mercy" (photo). Interior walls and partitions have been gutted: as in other American mosques, masking tape guidelines run the length of the floor to orient worshippers to Mecca. This is Sunnat-ul-Jamaat mosque, established in the Bronx at 24 Mount Hope Street between Walton and Jerome Avenues, called officially the "Islamic Sunnat-ul-Jamaat." It was created by Guyanese immigrants of Indian Muslim descent whose native language is English. They began in a basement on the Grand Concourse in 1978 and purchased a three-storey single-family building in 1988 for \$45,000. The building next door was for sale and they planned to buy it in order to be able to accommodate three to four thousand worshippers (although they counted five hundred paying members). Most are from Guyana; there is a minority of West Africans. On Sunday October 7th, 1990, they convened to celebrate two events: *mulid an-nabi*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the traditional world-wide religious day of all Muslims, and the annual general meeting and election of mosque officers. A general meeting to hold elections complies with New York state rules for non-profit voluntary organizations and combines religious Muslim ritual with secular, financial and organizational business in a peculiar, very American amalgam. At the same time, for new immigrants, the mosque has provided a friendly, sociable setting in which to practice leadership techniques, marshal political support, and explain voting procedures and symbols. The event was videotaped by the community to serve as a souvenir and copies were sent back to families in Guyana. The four-hour celebration ended with a homecooked meal combining Indian, West Indian, and West African cuisine. The women ate indoors and upstairs, and the men outside. Songs accompanying the festivities borrowed American folk melodies but added appropriate new lyrics. For example, to the tune of "Five Hundred Miles," made famous in the 1960s by folk

revival groups such as The Journeymen, The Kingston Trio, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, students from the mosque school offered their rewritten chorus: "A way of life, a way of life, Islam is a way of life." The original American verses speak of the adventure, the poverty, and the romance of the lonesome road that never reverts back home, as in: "If you miss the train I'm on / You will know that I have gone / You can hear the whistle blow five hundred miles / Not a shirt on my back / Not a penny to my name / Lord I can't go back home this-a-way." New Muslim lyrics make a different use of the metaphor of life as a road when worshippers sang in the mosque: "Do you

know what Islam says? / It says life's a big, big chance / It says that life is a far road space / Return upon rest." The melody, a kind of architectural framework, is American, but the words are not. Conclusions Mosques must take on multiple roles, roles which juxtapose two notions of community: first, a traditional community evoked by the architectural form of a mosque and second, the creation of an elective community formed by the streets and neighborhoods of the American city. A New York city mosque simultaneously houses a traditional community steaming from a shared religious heritage, but also an elective community of voluntarily

associated members — in this instance, the West Indians, Indians, and West Africans of the Bronx. The mosque serves as a social club for many residents in the immediate neighborhood (an elective community) but also celebrates the Prophet's birthday (the traditional Muslim community). Numerous activities, a school, religious rites, and an organization are also used to create an elective community of voluntarily associated members who comply with state rules for non-profit clubs. The traditional structure, the mosque, must be sustained by the edifice of elective communities in the form of

a voluntary association bureaucracy. Sunnat-ul-Jamaat mosque may have begun as a traditional, all-male Muslim place of prayer. But the American mosque has evolved as a social club for families and a local community center, a place for children to play and families to celebrate American holidays. It provides a place for recreational activities but more than that it provides emotional sustenance through the development of close personal relations and social solidarity. The mosque is not necessarily a replacement for family, kinship, and neighborhood groups presumably eroded by the forces of urbanization. Instead the mosque in America may enhance or work to strengthen and enlarge tradi-

tional social units such as the family. Finally, a mosque is not just a symbol but also a building with local architectural presence and ethnic resonance. Within its walls, the potential effect of mixing urban, elective communities with traditionally structured figurations is still to be measured, as is the degree to which these mosques, acting as voluntary associations, aid individuals to identify their political interests, to practice their religion, to obtain their cultural objectives, and to protect their group's rights.



Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Mosque, Bronx
Photos: Susan Slyomovics



1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1945), vol. 1, p. 198. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, reprinted from the 1835 imprint. 2 See my "Adult Play: New York City's Ethnic and Social Clubs," in *Encyclopedia of Ethnic American Literature and Arts*, ed. George Leonard (New York: Garland, in press). Based on my fieldwork, I describe four organizations: 1) the Pentian Society, a Greek social club in Queens, 2) the Dominican Club Deportivo in Washington Heights, 3) the African-American Brooklyn Elite Checker Club, and 4) the Jewish First Marmorosh Young Men's Aid Society. 3 Susan Slyomovics, "New York City's Muslim World Day Parade," in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995):157-177. 4 Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964), n.p. 5 Renata Holod, *University of Pennsylvania, 1992*. 6 Levant Akbari, "The Role of Mosques in America," *Markaz: Journal of the Muslim Center of New York* (Groundbreaking Special Number) 12:10-12 (Reprinted from *The Minsaret*, November-December 1986). 7 This description of the Sunnat-ul-Jamaat mosque is a shorter version of my article, "The Muslim World Day Parade and 'Storefront' Mosques of New York City," in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press), in press.