

**Muslim Gravestones in Detroit**

**A Study in Diversity**

**By**

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# Muslim Gravestones in Detroit

Ronald R. Stockton

Gravestones can be used to document and explain the exceptional internal diversity of the Muslim community of southeast Michigan. In reality, this is not a single community but a mosaic of diverse communities, diverse in terms of national, cultural, and even religious sub-groupings. While Muslims agree on the five Pillars of the Faith, there is otherwise great variation.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, the gravestones and markers in this study are not Islamic stones. They are the stones of Muslims. And Muslims do not fit a single pattern. Perhaps we need to see these sub-communities as ethnic groups, or more precisely religio-ethnic groups.

Scholars have offered several definitions of ethnicity. Most refer to a common history and identity, typically linked to a national origin. They mention cultural values, a religious tradition, and a sense of boundaries as to who is in the group and who is not. Christiano *et al* specify “people who are presumed, by members of the group itself and by outsiders, to have a shared collective origin and history, and a common set of cultural attributes that serve to establish boundaries between the group and the larger society.” Putnam and Campbell focus on “a shared history, legacy of persecution, mass migration, and geographic concentration.” Aswad states such a group has a real or fictive common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a focus on symbolic elements, among them language, religion, physical appearance, or tribal identification. They have norms, values and beliefs that set them apart, and institutional components including religious centers, clubs, or newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

The Muslims in this study trace their presence in southeast Michigan back to the late 1800s. They are buried in thirty-one different cemeteries or cemetery sub-sections with Muslim graves.<sup>3</sup> They come from twenty-five different countries or distinctive places with at least nine

religious or cultural sub-groupings. It will not surprise most readers that there are individuals from the Arab world, particularly Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, and Egypt. It may be more surprising that there are individuals from Albania, Macedonia, Iran, Montenegro, and Bosnia and from India, Pakistan, and Bangla Desh. And it may be even more surprising to find individuals from Nigeria, Turkey, Guyana, Kosovo, and China. There are Crimean Turks and Afghans, and Azerbaijanis and Turkmens. There are Sunnis and Shi'a and religio-ethnic sub-groups such as Ismailis, Ahmadiyyas, Bektashis, and Dawoodi Bohras. There are Hispanics and white converts and African Americans.<sup>4</sup> And there are people from countries that no longer exist such as South Yemen and Hyderabad.

Historians, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, and others approach this community with different paradigms.<sup>5</sup> The approach of this article is to examine the Muslim community through how individuals are defined on their gravestones. The data are a collection of photos of over 1,000 Muslim markers.<sup>6</sup> All were taken by the author.

#### **Four Significant Imams**

The evolution and development of the Muslim community in Detroit can be seen through its mosques. Today the Detroit area has over eighty mosques and many Imams, but that is a modern luxury. Four prominent Imams have passed on. All four are founders in the sense that they built communities and left behind institutions.<sup>7</sup> Each represented a different component of the community. Their stories and their gravestones are very different.

**Imam Hussien Karoub** (1893-1973) was the first significant Imam in the area. He arrived from Lebanon in 1913. He was a Sunni Arab but he served the needs of all Muslims. He proudly considered himself to be “Leader of Islam in North America,” an inscription on his gravestone



Fig. 1. Imam Hussien Karoub, Roseland Park

(Fig. 1). No one is certain how or where he received his formal training, or what that training was, but he had memorized the Koran (a sign of serious scholarship) so individuals were glad to have his services. He built a mosque in Highland Park, but that failed so he built a new structure in Dearborn. It is called the American Muslim Society (AMS). It was built in the Southend neighborhood, an area that saw waves of immigrant populations: Italians, Romanians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Appalachian whites. Today it is heavily Yemeni.<sup>8</sup>

His gravestone in Roseland Park, Berkeley has the Imam’s name spelled Hussien. Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, is a common name, especially popular among the Shi’a. Many gravestones have errors on them, some minor, some more serious. Dates are backward, Arabic letters are upside down, spellings are off. Whether these errors are from confused carvers who did not read Arabic, or family members or friends whose weak English lead to errors in writing out the message to the carver, we cannot say. Ironically, Hussien was Imam Karoub’s preferred spelling. And lest we think it was an error at Ellis Island that the Imam tolerated, we note that his son, Imam Mohammed Hussien Karoub,

spelled his middle name the same way.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that the father called himself “Rev. Imam.”

**Imam Mohammed Jawad Chirri** was the first Shi’a Imam of note in the area. He was born in Lebanon in 1915 and came to the U.S. in 1949 after studying at the noted Theological University in Najaf, Iraq. He had been recruited by local families to organize and lead their small community. A history produced by his mosque, now called the Islamic Center of America, described him as “an exceptional young author and scholar.” However, “almost from the time he arrived factional rivalry erupted.” In 1950, he left for Michigan City, Indiana to lead the small Muslim community there. He learned English and began to familiarize himself with American culture and life. In 1954, a group of young leaders in Detroit decided to set a new direction. Supported by key elders, they urged Imam Chirri to return with promises of “sincerity, enthusiasm, and the moral and financial support of the seniors.” He agreed, and was welcomed back. As the booklet states, his “Hijra” was ended. This was an allusion to an incident in the life of the prophet Mohammed when he was attacked in his home town of Mecca and had to flee. After establishing himself as a brilliant leader in Medina, he returned in triumph. It is called *hijra* or flight and is the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The use of this term in the booklet was not to compare Imam Chirri with the prophet Mohammed, but to note the historic parallel of rejection, flight, and triumphant return.<sup>10</sup>

The Imam wanted to open dialogue. He met with the Sunni head of Al Azhar seminary in Cairo and published an extended conversation between himself and a psychologist who was a convert.<sup>11</sup> He also helped Muslims adapt to the American environment. He preached sermons in English and wore a business suit (sometimes under an open Islamic robe). At times, he greeted

people without his turban. Girls and boys sat together in Sunday school classes and there were social gatherings in the mosque. Some people objected to this, saying the mosque was too much like a Christian Sunday school, but generations of young people were able to preserve their Islamic traditions while becoming successful in the wider community.

Near the end of his life, his congregation realized they needed a larger facility. Under energetic new leaders, but with an aging Chirri still playing a role, the congregation built a magnificent new structure. The Islamic Center of America (ICA), on the Detroit/Dearborn border, is considered the largest mosque in the country (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Islamic Center of America

Those Imam Chirri left behind looked upon him as a historic figure. His monument in the United Memorial Gardens in Plymouth features a large depiction of an open Koran with the *Fatiha* in both Arabic and English (Fig. 3). The *Fatiha*, the opening surah/chapter of the Koran,



Figure 3. Imam Mohammed Jawad Chirri, United Memorial Gardens

serves as an invocation to begin meetings or events such as weddings or dinners. It is a prayer for guidance and mercy, and an affirmation of God’s Majesty. The first line – “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate....” is called the Bismillah because of its first word. Because the purpose of visiting a grave is to pray for the

dead, it is often found on gravestones. Sometimes there is simply the word *Fatiha* or even “Pray” in English.

On the other side of the monument there is a laser photograph of the Imam, with the appellation, “a Great Pioneer of Islam in America.” It is ironic that earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim gravestones in Roseland Park with photos were often defaced. To those who did the defacing, the photographs violated the aniconic tradition that prohibited images in public. Imam Chirri’s photograph shows that Islamic culture is complex and evolving.

**Imam Ismail Vebhi** was from Albania. For three decades, the needs of the Albanian Sunni community had been met by Imam Karoub. But Karoub was an Arab. In 1948 the Albanian American Moslem Society invited Ismail Vebhi to join them as their Imam. He was born in 1919 and studied theology in the University of Tirana in Albania and at Al Azhar in Cairo. He was a strong Albanian patriot and anti-Communist. Because he was from an elite home (his father had been head of the Albanian Muslim community) his arrival in America was not easy. He had to adjust to the poorly-educated working



Fig. 4. Imam Ismail Vebhi,  
Knollwood Cemetery

and merchant classes under his care. He worked cooperatively with other Muslims (Sunni and Shi’a) and with Christians, and acquired an old Armenian Church in Detroit for his mosque. He died in 2008 and is buried in Canton’s

Knollwood Cemetery in a section with many Albanians (Fig. 4). His stone has two excerpts from Surah/chapter 89 in the *Koran, Al Fajr* (The Dawn). This passage focuses on the Judgment Day and the reward that awaits a righteous person. One says “As to those who believe and do righteous deeds, their home is in Paradise, an

award for their works.” The other says “Peace be on you. You enter the Garden because of the good you did in the world.” His wife Betty Haxhlie, a Christian born in 1932, survived him. Her stone is with the Imam.<sup>12</sup>

**Baba Rexheb** was the leader of the Bektashis, a unique element within Islam. They became a distinctive group in the 1300s. They were Turkish Sufis but are different from the better-known Mevlevi (“whirling dervish”) school of Rumi. Historically, they were spiritual advisors to the Janissaries, the elite but politically threatening military force of the Ottoman Empire. For political reasons, the Janissaries were suppressed and disbanded in 1826. The Bektashi leaders went underground to avoid arrest. Many fled to Albania, a Turkish province but far from the authorities in Istanbul. In 1925, they experienced a second wave of suppression when Mustapha Kamal Ataturk disbanded all Sufi lodges. In time, they came to be an Albanian community rather than Turkish. Many consider themselves Shi’a (Alevi in Turkish terms) but others resist that designation, insisting that they have a distinctive identity.

In 1954 Rexheb Beqiri, known by his religious name Baba Rexheb (1901-1995) left his exile in Italy and moved to Detroit to serve the American Bektashi community.<sup>13</sup> This was a time of religious suppression in Communist Albania. Baba Rexheb was a noted scholar, the author of significant books. Under his leadership the community thrived and created a lodge (*Tekke*) in the town of Taylor. (The Bektashis do not use the term mosque.) This became the national headquarters of the American Bektashi movement.

The Bektashis seldom interact with Muslims outside of their community. Bekhtashi women tend not to cover their heads and alcohol is allowed. Their clergy have different levels according to education and authority. The basic level is called Dervish, the top level Baba.





Fig. 5. Bektashi cap, Woodmere Cemetery



Fig. 6. Turbe of Baba Rexheb, Taylor

Their religious figures wear a small distinctive circular cap for head cover (Fig. 5). Baba Rexheb's mausoleum (*Turbe*) is in Taylor, at the *Tekke* (Fig. 6).

### **Some Distinctive Communities**

There are several Muslim groups that have their own distinctive history and tradition. A brief discussion of these will illustrate the range of cultures and histories and even religious distinctions that fall under the label "Muslim."

**The Early Turks** were from the Ottoman Empire. Turkish immigrants today are mostly well educated. They come from urban areas and they come as families. A century ago, immigrant Turks were mostly single men, often from villages deep in the Anatolian hinterland. Some were ethnic Kurds. They were drawn to factory jobs in the automobile industry. Few were literate. Because Turkey was a vast empire, those from Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia, and the Arab world were also called "Turks."

Anthropologist Barbara Bilgé (who prefers the term Old Turks) conducted research on the Ottoman Turks in the Detroit area. She discovered that from 1900-1925, when they began to arrive in larger numbers, 22,089 self-identified Turks and Turkish Kurds were admitted to the United States. By gender, 93% were male. Ninety-five percent never married. Of those males

who did marry, only 25% had Muslim wives. Sixty-seven took American brides, only one of whom converted to Islam (although most families observed both Islamic and Christian holidays and customs). Few ever returned home, even for visits. One of the first organizations they formed was a burial society. For \$2.00 a year (in the 1920s) individuals would be buried and then honored with a memorial dinner after forty days and then after a year. The society purchased 300 plots in Roseland Park Cemetery, then 300 more in four other cemeteries. None were identified by Bilgé but one was surely Northview Cemetery in Dearborn.<sup>14</sup>

Northview is just a few miles from the Ford Rouge plant. It has a cluster of 39 Turkish stones in a low, isolated corner. Men would live together as roommates so several stones include an expression of friendship (“My Dear Friend,” “Dear Cousin,” “Dear Uncle”). Five have military stones, reflecting service during World War I. Some have Islamic expressions (“Recite the *fatiha*” or “If ye be true believers fear God”). Some report their hometown, one in Albania. Some have their American name and their birth name (Sham Bey Ismail and John Allie, for example) or just their American name (Russell Darvish).<sup>15</sup>

The stone of Ebrahim Essmail (1896-1949) is typical (Fig. 7). It has “Dear Friend” in



Fig. 7. Ebrahim Essmail,  
Northview Cemetery

English, the *Bismillah* (“In the name of God”) in Arabic, and then two additional passages from the Koran. One (Surah 2:225) resembles the *Shahada*. This is the Islamic statement of faith: “There is no God but God/Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God.” The statement on the stone affirms “Allah! There is no God but He, the

Living, the Self-Sustaining.” Then another verse, in an alternate script, says “the rest is from

God's perfection." It also notes that Essmail is from Erzerom, far in the east. At the time of his youth, Erzerom would have been considered an Armenian town, with many Circassians and Kurds. We cannot tell his ethnicity from his name.

**Albanians** are among those Muslim communities for whom identity pre-dates religion. Their gravestones often reflect this reality. Albanian identity traces back to the ancient Illyrians, well before Islam emerged.<sup>16</sup> A walk through an Albanian Muslim burial section offers dramatic evidence of how powerful national identity is. The stone in Detroit's Woodmere Cemetery of Ali Gacaferi (1950-1988) makes the point. It identifies his family as being from Kosovo, an Albanian-populated area outside of Albania (Fig. 8).

The text is simple: "Here rests the body of Ali Gacaferi who unexpectedly at a young age departed from the family." He was 38. It says (in Albanian) that he was married on December 13, 1971. There is no mention of a spouse or children.



Fig. 8. Ali Gacaferi, Woodmere Cemetery

But there is more. Gacaferi's stone also has the striking red and black Albanian double eagle. This is adopted from the Ottoman flag. Although the Seljuks, the first Turkish dynasty, had their own double-eagle symbol, the Ottoman Sultan adopted the Byzantine symbol of Christianity facing east and west in 1453 when he captured Constantinople. His empire also faced two directions, into Europe and into Asia. This symbol has continued to be associated with the Ottoman tradition. Some Albanian stones have Islamic phrases but equally common are images of the national mosque in Tirana, the national capital. During the long Communist era,

this mosque served as a symbol of continuing Albanian identity. Here we see that national or ethnic identity often supersedes religious identity, or at least persists alongside of it.

Another Albanian stone in Woodmere Cemetery is that of Abdul B. Sula (1893-1957)



(Fig. 9). It has the words “patriot” and “diplomat,” reflecting the fact that he was Ambassador to Egypt during Ottoman times. His wife has “Devout Spirit” under her name, acknowledging her spiritual depth. Sula was the author of a posthumously-published book,

*Albania’s Struggle for Independence*. His stone has the Albanian flag, and a line drawing of the national mosque encompassing the whole text. This may reflect a spiritual mooring, as if faith covers all. There is a popular Koranic reference (“for those who believe and do righteous deeds, their home is in paradise”) but the image of a candle is the uniquely significant symbol. It is an allusion to the poem “Words of the Candle” by Naim Frasheri, Albania’s national poet and an advocate of an Albanian renaissance. A section of Frasheri’s poem is quoted on the stone, with his name mentioned. Using a metaphor consistent with his Bekhtashi identity, he promises to melt as a candle to make light so that Albanians can see each other. The spiritual tone of the poem, here quoted in English, reflects Sula’s powerful patriotism.

*Here among you have I risen,  
And aflame am I now blazing,  
Just a bit of light to give you,  
That I change your night to daytime . . .*

*When you see that I have vanished,  
Do not think that I have perished,  
I’m alive, among the living,  
In the rays of truth I’m standing... ”<sup>17</sup>*

**Bosnia-Herzegovina** is today a small nation in the Balkans. It has both Christians and Muslims but in Detroit almost all Bosnians are Muslims (known as Bosniaks). They have been here since the late 1800s. However, in those early decades they did not have distinctive gravestones.

Bosnia is known today for its tragic involvement in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In 1995 an ethnically and religiously mixed region with Muslims and Serbs was turned into a killing field.

The Muslim population were targeted for massacres in Srebrenica and elsewhere. Sometime in the 1980s the local community created a section within Woodmere Cemetery for their own use.

The area is easily identifiable by its dramatically distinctive gravestones (Fig. 10). Female stones have rounded tops, male stones flat. There is also a tendency for female names to end in the letter “a.” All stones have a common saying: “You will always be in our hearts. Your loved ones.” Often the family



Fig. 10. Bosnian Stones, Woodmere Cemetery

puts up a temporary wooden marker. These markers are hand-made, some with stick-on letters and numbers. After the customary year of mourning, when the grave has settled and the family has raised the money, there will be a permanent stone. Observant Muslims note that the area is laid out in two segments resting at ninety-degree angles to each other. This means that there is no effort at proper alignment to Mecca. There are also foot stones, unusual in the Midwest.<sup>18</sup>

**The Crimean Turks**, also called Tatars, are an ancient people, tracing themselves back to the age of the Mongols. They were famous for their ferocious cavalry. When the Ottomans needed a cavalry assault, they turned to the Tatars.<sup>19</sup> Today, their homeland in the Crimean peninsula is

of exceptional strategic importance, being the base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. They are a distinctive population, being Turks immersed in the Russian empire since 1783. Their local gravesite (Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens, Livonia) has 27 separate graves with 44 bodies. Twenty-two markers have religious symbols or words, usually the *fatiha*, the *Bismillah*, or an open Koran. Some use the modern Turkish alphabet rather than Arabic script. Twenty-four markers identify the Crimea or Caucasus as place of origin. Seven say “Krim,” eight use the English version, “Crimea.” Three mention places in Crimea: Yalta, north Caucasus, Kazan. Seven mention Turkey as a place of origin: Erzerum, Istanbul, Sevdisehir, Orzerim, Moden, Ankara, Izmir. Three have a star and crescent, a pre-Islamic Turkish symbol, but nothing else. Beker Ali (1903-1984), son of Necmedin, was so proud of his heritage that his marker features “Kezleve-Kirim,” with his name in smaller text.

The marker of Hayder Haydin (1923-2009) is typical of many others (Fig. 11). It has the Ottoman star and crescent and in the upper right the Crimean symbol found on the Crimean flag. He identifies his birth city in Crimea and below has the *bismillah* and a request for prayer.



Fig. 11. Hayder Haydin,  
Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens

There is evidence of long exposure to Germans and Russians. Some names reflect the linguistic patterns of the Slavic and Germanic languages. Ismail Gutschetl (1905-1978) was born in Teuchachabel in the north Caucasus. Meliahmer Isslamow (1927-1990) suggests a Slavic adaptation. Seynep Arabaci (1902-1979) may have an Arab ancestry, with a Turkish ending. As with Bosnians, some have accent marks to indicate that there is no exact match between our Latin alphabet and the Turkish language.

Kaşif Acimurat (1921-1976) puts a mark under the “s” to reflect the fact that in the Turkish alphabet ş with a mark would be pronounced “sh.”

There are four Muslim-Christian mixed marriages. In a very American style, two proclaim their long marriages, one 35 years, one 50 years. Both of the husbands were Muslim. Both wives remained Christian. In a third case, the marker (Fig. 12) has a photo of the happy Mehmed couple, Rifaat (1923 - 2017) and Arlene (1934-2005). They are in traditional Crimean dress. Below his name is an open book,



Fig. 12. Mehmed Couple, Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens

“Holy Koran.” Below hers is “Holy Bible.” They add a romantic note that they were “married 29 wonderful years.”<sup>20</sup>

In the midst of these markers is someone identified as Turkmen (Fig. 13). The Turkmen



Fig. 13. Mehmet Tevfik, Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens

are a small group concentrated in Iraq. They are not from Turkmenistan but are a distinctive group with roots in Turkey. Although they are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq, after Arabs and Kurds, there are few in the Detroit area. They are mostly Sunni, although some are Shi'a. They are concentrated in the north of the country, near the Kurds. Over the

past century, they have often been persecuted. During the wars following the American invasion of 2003 they were targeted by extremist groups. If we are correct that this person is of Iraqi heritage, then he obviously preferred to be buried with Turks rather than with Arabs.

In a different place (Roseland Park Cemetery) there is a Crimean Turk whose stone tells a remarkable story. He is a Lithuanian who was simultaneously a Crimean, a Turk, a Muslim and maybe even a cultural Christian. His name is Stepas Iljasevicius (Fig. 14). The ending of the surname is Lithuanian. The root of the surname is Elijah, which can be Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. The given name is definitely Christian. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. In the lower left of the stone is a star and crescent



Fig. 14. Stepas Iljasevicius, Roseland Park Cemetery

reflecting a Turkish identity. In the lower right is the symbol of the Crimean Turks. But what were Crimean Turks doing in Lithuania, which is far from Crimea? There is a possible answer. Sometime during the long two-century war when the Ottoman Empire was trying to conquer central Europe, some Crimean cavalry switched sides. They were allowed to maintain their religion and culture while being a part of the Polish cavalry. This was a time when Poland and Lithuania were one country. Today there are only a few remaining Tatar villages in northeast Poland and in Lithuania.

In 1683 there was the ferocious Siege of Vienna. This was a turning point in history. Had Vienna fallen, central Europe would have come under Ottoman rule. Everyone acknowledges that it was the Polish cavalry under King Jan Sobieski that broke the siege. What is less known is that the Crimean units threw the Turkish rear into confusion as Sobieski bore down upon them. Put simply, Muslim units saved Austria from Islamic rule.<sup>21</sup>

Across the top of the stone there is a passage from the Koran (Surah 55, Verse 27). It says, “All that is on earth will perish. But the Face of the Lord will abide forever, Full of



Majesty, Bounty and Honor. Which of the favors/gifts of God would you deny?” Stepas was a Muslim but he was also a Lithuanian with a Christian name. And he was a Crimean and a Turk. And that curious mix of characteristics tells us not only about Stepas but about Poland, Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean Tatars, and the history of times long past.

**African-Americans** make up 20% of all American Muslims.<sup>22</sup> For over four centuries, Muslim or not, African-Americans have asserted their identity through their political and cultural expressions. The nature of their identity and their understanding of what it means to be a Muslim significantly affects what appears on their gravestones. Those associated with the orthodox Sunni tradition will have markers in that style. These tend to be flat and rectangular, with some religious phrase and information about the deceased. Some include the cultural expressions common within the Black community, for example identifying birth and death dates as sunrise/sunset or arrived/departed.

In the Detroit area, two cemeteries are devoted to African Americans. They were started in 1925 to give respectful consideration to the needs of the community, something alleged to be



Fig. 15. Catherine Morris, Detroit Memorial Park East

missing elsewhere. One is called Detroit Memorial Park West (in Redford), the other Detroit Memorial Park East (in Warren). The East cemetery does not have an identifiable Muslim section, just individual graves. One is that of Catharine Morris Khatoon (Fig. 15). She is buried with her Christian relatives and is called by both

her birth name and her Muslim name. (Khatoon was once a title of nobility. Today it means a

righteous woman). She also has a bench over her grave, a frequent (but more expensive) practice among African Americans.

Her stone has the sunrise-sunset designation and a message from her nieces: “Dear Auntie. I miss you every moment, miss your kind and loving care, but we know your home is in heaven and someday we’ll meet you there.” This is in the tradition of a “your death” statement, from living to the dead.<sup>23</sup> In Arabic, there is the *Bismillah* and the words *Insha-Allah* (if God is willing). The artistic calligraphy says “Allah, the Prophet Mohammed, Allah’s prayer and peace be upon him.”

In contrast, individuals associated with heterodox Islam or those who are Afro-centric may have stones that are different in ways that reflect their understanding of Islam and how it fits in with their ethnic heritage. Detroit Memorial Park West has a section entitled Muslim Garden. It is dedicated to the Nation of Islam (NOI). It has just over a dozen graves. The Nation of Islam is an organization with its roots in Detroit. It started when its founder Fard Mohammed began to receive revelations. These revelations and the fact that he claimed to be a prophet made NOI heretical to mainstream Sunni Muslims. It was not until the death of Elijah Mohammed, who led the NOI from 1934-1975, that the Nation, under Elijah’s son and successor Warith Deen Mohammed, embraced mainstream Sunni teaching and renamed itself the American Society of Muslims. However, a break-away group under Louis Farrakhan kept the name.<sup>24</sup>

Under Elijah Mohammed the NOI emphasized racial pride, a strict sense of morality, and a belief that African Americans were a distinctive nation. Adherents were expected to take an Islamic name to affirm their new identity. In this small burial section we see the complexity of this community. Thomas Rashid el Amin was “known in this life as Tommy Richmond.” James Otis Bradford, who fought in Korea, did not change his name. Nor did Laura Hathaway.

In time, NOI created a paramilitary group called the Fruit of Islam. Those involved in that original effort were known as Pioneers. Henry Shaheed (1918-2008, born Vaughn) is praised for being a loving father, grandfather and uncle. He is also proudly identified as an FOI Pioneer (Fig. 16). His stone has the striking black and red star and crescent emblem (borrowed from the Ottomans but associated with Islam). Shaheed was a significant person.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 16. Henry Shaheed, Detroit Memorial Park West

Finally, there are two other stones of a heterodox tradition. In Knollwood Cemetery we find Yale Guy Miller (1971-2007) (Fig. 17). Above his name is an additional name, Nujoma.



Fig. 17. Nujoma Guy Miller, Knollwood Cemetery

This is perhaps in honor of Sam Nujoma the leader of the Southwest African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), the resistance organization that fought in the 1970s and 1980s to make Namibia free from South African control. In the upper left of the marker is a weeping willow, a symbol of mourning, and in the upper right a lion. Below the dates is an *ankh*, the ancient Egyptian religious symbol. There is also the phrase “Prophet of Truth,” surely a reference to Mohammed, not to Miller. Yusuf Nuruddin of the University of Massachusetts-Boston, a specialist in Africana and Islamic Cultural Studies, had the following observations: “The lower middle symbol is certainly an Ankh, the Kemetic (Ancient Egyptian) symbol for life, but more importantly worn or displayed,

usually as a necklace pendant, by all Afrocentric African Americans who are knowledgeable and proud of the heritage of the Nile Valley Civilizations. It is not so much a sign of heterodoxy but let's say a relaxed orthodoxy that recognizes heritage and history. The top symbol on the right may be the Lion of Judah, though it is not in the traditional conquering lion pose. If it is a Lion of Judah, it is a Rastafarian symbol. From all the various symbols and the adopted name of Nujoma, this person was exploring various facets of African identity. And perhaps Islam was one of the anti-western ideologies he tried on at some point.”<sup>26</sup>

Elsewhere in Islamic Memorial Gardens in Westland there is a stone for Altheria M. Shakir (1952-2009). This is one of two exclusively Muslim cemeteries (Fig. 18). She has the common terms arrived and departed announcing her dates. In the lower left of the marker is carved “A Believing Servant of God.” The lower right has “Peace be Unto



Fig. 18. Altheria Shakir, Islamic Memorial Gardens

You.” These inscriptions are not unusual. But right in the middle of the mottled rose-red granite marker is a five-pointed star with striking chalk-white points. Again, Yusuf Nurrudin offers some insights: “Aletheria may have been an Eastern Star, although that circle is not a traditional part of the five-pointed Eastern Star symbol. The Eastern Stars are the female affiliates of Freemasonry. Heterodox? Not necessarily so. The Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine is an allied body, considered the "highest" house of Prince Hall [African-American] Freemasonry and other black lodges. Whereas with the white Shriners the official rite was a burlesque of Islam, many African Americans, especially older generations, took the Shrine seriously and thus were introduced to Islam through the Shrine and sister affiliates such as the

Daughters of Isis (an affiliate body of the Eastern Stars). I am speculating about her affiliations of course.”<sup>27</sup>

What these markers show is how individuals and cultural groups infuse their own images and themes into how they define themselves in their final message to those left behind.

### **An International Community with an interesting pattern**

Islam is an international religion. While most of the Muslims in the Detroit area are from the Arab world or south Asia, others are from disparate lands. A brief tour of examples will make the point, but will also raise an issue. Let us look at some cases, especially from United Memorial Gardens. This is the largest of the new-growth cemeteries, with many burials in recent decades. It has three general Muslim sections as well as a section for Baby Muslims. After we have looked at the cases, we can discuss the issue.

Yusuf Myftari (1906-2000) and Anife Myftari (1910-1991) were from Macedonia, then a part of Yugoslavia. The name suggests that their ancestor was a mufti, a religious leader. Hussein Ali (1957-1991) was from Guyana in South America. Syed Meersyed (1928-1987) was from Mysore, India. His stone has the specific minute of his death (7:15 p.m.). (Note that the term *Syed* indicates descent from the Prophet Mohammed, a matter of honor). Sharifa Mohammed Hussain al-Tabataba (1926-2008) shares a surname with an Iranian family of religious leaders, some of whom migrated to Iraq long ago. *Sharif* means both honorable and descended from Mohammed. Her bench has her photograph (with her hair not covered).

A very different situation is that of Yvan Kurdy (1917-2005), identified in Arabic as Khaled. His name suggests a Kurdish heritage. His marker indicates that he was born in Canada

and died in Canada. As with others, his presence in a Detroit-area cemetery is curious. The Kurds are concentrated in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey. In these two countries, they are over 20% of the population. As a people with national aspirations, they have often been caught up in political turmoil in their homelands. There are Kurds in the Detroit area dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mr. Kurdy, a Canadian, appears not to be from that community.

Another surprising case is that of Chief Jubril A. O. Masha (1953-1994) and Hajjah



Fig. 19. Hajjah Abeke Masha, United Memorial Gardens

Abeke O. Masha (1935-2003). They were from Nigeria (Fig. 19). Perhaps half of all Nigerians are Muslims, most living in the northern provinces. And yet there are Muslims in some places in the mostly-Christian south, especially in the southwest in the Yoruba homeland.

From the names and the dress styles of the Mashas we can tell they were Yoruba. Both were born in multi-ethnic Lagos where there is a large Yoruba population.

(The title Hajjah indicates that Mrs. Masha completed the traditional religious pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina.) But there is no identifiable Yoruba community in Detroit so why are they here?

Ebrahim Pakideh (1915-1990) and Nina Pakideh (1915-2005) are a second couple with few compatriots in the area. They were from Baku, Azerbaijan (Fig. 20). There is no significant Azeri population in the Detroit area,



Fig. 20. Ebrahim Pakideh, United Memorial Gardens

and they identify themselves as coming from Monroe, a town south of Detroit on the Ohio border.

Husein Chao Fong Pai (1911-1998) and Shen Mei Shai Pai (1912-2006) are a third couple. They were from China (Fig. 21). They are buried in Woodmere Cemetery. She has



only her Chinese names listed in English script but in Arabic she is identified by her Muslim name, Fatima. In Chinese, both list their full names. For Husein (shown) that would be ZhaoFeng (his given name), Pai (his surname),

Fig. 21. Hussein Pei, Woodmere Cemetery

and MingXiang (the courtesy name given to males

when they turn 20). Fatima also lists her full names: That would be Shen MeiXia, plus Husein's last name in front of her actual name so it became Pai Shen MeiXia.

In China, many Muslims are ethnic minorities in distant parts of the country. There is, however, an ethnic group called Hui who are Muslims of mainstream Chinese culture. They are the third largest minority group with 86 million people. They are widely dispersed across the country but some are found in the northeast province of ShanDong, the home province of Husein according to his stone. This is also the home of Confucius and is a traditional center of Confucianism. Fatima's home province is just south of this in AnHui. The gravestones have an acknowledgement of their homes, locating them in a village and a province. They also have Confucian-type statements that express respect and piety towards their deceased parents. The stones were placed by their great grandchildren who express respect and grief, "with tears when placing a gravestone." It may seem ironic to find what sounds like Confucian statements on a Muslim stone but Confucianism is a cultural tradition, not a religion. It is not inconsistent with

Islam. These are truly multi-cultural stones (Chinese, Islamic, and perhaps Hui) with three languages, English, Arabic, and Chinese.<sup>28</sup>

A former student, Debra Chen, who visited the gravesite with me, had the following observations about the stone: “There is definitely a lot of the diction to express immense respect/sadness for the deceased. This could come from Confucian tradition as it was widely accepted/practiced in China.” Chen noted the following examples:

先考 : Father that has passed away (先 is a prefix added to indicate memory, grief, and respect)

先妣 : Mother that has passed away (先 is a prefix added to indicate memory, grief, and respect)

孝女 : Respectful (great grand) daughter

孝男 : Respectful (great grand) son

泣立 : With tears when placing gravestone

These last few graves are curious because the individuals do not appear to be part of a local community. Their presence here suggests a pattern of burial migration into the Detroit area. People from China, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, and even Canada, are like individuals out of place. But perhaps there is another explanation. A story from Massachusetts might help. As far as we can tell, the first Arab church in the United States was in Worcester, Massachusetts. It was founded in 1885 by Lebanese Christians. In time, they were able to get a section of the local cemetery designated for their community. Then a curious thing happened. Christian Arabs in other parts of the country, unable to have their bodies returned to Lebanon, began to “return” to Worcester. In a sense, the presence of a community in Worcester served as a substitute homeland. Perhaps something similar happened here. At this point, there is a large and well-established Muslim community in the Detroit area. In fact, as we have seen, there are multiple sub-communities reflecting the international nature of Islam. Words such as diversity and internal differentiation come to mind. Perhaps the presence of Chinese, Canadian, Nigerian,



Guyanese, or Azeri graves does not reflect local residence. Perhaps those persons lived elsewhere but did not want to be buried in the local cemetery where they might well be the only Muslim. Perhaps they wanted to be buried within the embrace of a familiar community. Perhaps Detroit is their substitute homeland.<sup>29</sup>

### Even More Diversity

The Dawoodi Bohra are a Sufi branch of the Isma'ilis. The Isma'ilis originated in Persia and were associated with the Fatimid dynasty. Once they were the largest branch of the Shi'a tradition. Today, most Isma'ilis are in Pakistan, with their base in India. They are a business community. There are few in the U.S. although



Fig. 22. Dawoodi Bohra,  
Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens

their first congregation was founded in the Detroit area in 1975. Overseas, they are known by their distinctive white robes. They have a small burial section in Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens. The bodies are buried directly in the ground with box-like grave covers that are glistening white (Figure 22).

One group often overlooked because of their small numbers are the Hispanic Muslims. Some are secondary immigrants, having first settled in places such as Argentina or Mexico. One example is the Jechen family, Emilio (1907-1969) and Esperanza (1915-1998) who are buried in Roseland Park. Emilio has a Koran under his name, Esperanza a cross. There is no indication of their origin. Their stone says "Together Forever."

The Pashtuns are the core ethnic Afghans. Today we think of them in terms of the Afghan wars but they were in the Detroit area a century ago. Religiously they fit within the overall Sunni community. Some are buried in Roseland Park but others are in Woodmere. Many like to identify themselves as Afghans or Pashtuns. Noshad Khan (1898-1963) also proudly identifies himself as “Inventor of the Swim Float” (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23. Noshad Khan, Roseland Park Cemetery

Woodmere Cemetery itself is an interesting place. It is an exceptionally large cemetery, the largest in the Detroit area. It was founded in 1868 and is of the Rural Cemetery tradition. It has over 200,000 graves.<sup>30</sup> It is really a collection of sub-sections representing different groups and eras of history. There are sections for German socialists, Catholics, Mexicans, Jews, babies, Hungarians and prominent industrialists. At least 8 sub-sections are for Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

One of those is called AMS I. It served the needs of the American Muslim Society, one of the area’s first mosques. As we noted earlier, the mosque is located in Dearborn’s Southend neighborhood near the giant Ford Rouge plant where many early immigrants worked. Just a few hundred feet away is the Detroit border and Woodmere Cemetery.

AMS I was created for Sunni Muslims. Most in this section are Lebanese, Palestinian, Yemeni, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Turkish, Afghan, Albanian, and Macedonian. The typical stone will be flat on the ground, perhaps 12 x 24 inches. It will have the person’s name and dates, and a Koranic inscription across the top in Arabic, often the *Bismillah*. Sometimes it will have Allah or Mohammed written in elegant calligraphy. Often it will have something about

the individual. Birth place is popular: Yemen, Cairo, Gaza, Chittagong, Hyderabad, Damascus, El Bireh, Aleppo, and Palestine. Some list occupation. This is more common among South Asians. One person is identified as “Retired Assistant Postmaster, Sylhet, Bangla Desh.”

In time AMS I began to fill up. To accommodate the need for extra burial space, AMS II was created just a hundred yards south of AMS I. AMS II is quite different in style and ethnic makeup. There are larger stones, perhaps 36 x 82 inches, flat on the ground. Some graves are Shi’a. Many large stones, although none show in this article, have a border around the edge that resembles a portable prayer rug. This is where the Pai stones are located.

Bangladeshis in earlier times were buried in Roseland Park or in AMS1. However, in recent years there has been a sufficient number of people from the province of Sylhet in the north, that they have created their own section within Woodmere. In fact, one section is dedicated to Beanibazar, a sub-division of Syhet. This name refers to a specific town and means “morning market.” Those who study immigration patterns would not be surprised to find a localized section such as this. Immigrants are seldom typical of the nation they leave behind. They are often from a single province or even town. Partially this is because of the well-known phenomenon of chains of migration. A young man or a group of cousins arrive in a place and invite friends or other cousins to join them. They cluster together in a neighborhood. Soon they bring out wives and there is an ethnic enclave with its own clubs and religious institutions. Meanwhile, other young men from another village are forming their own enclave. That is a common pattern in America, and in Detroit. Now there are two additional Bangladeshi sections, one for Greater Chittagong and one called Galapagong Shomity.

The traumatic partition of India in 1947 produced a variety of reactions. In addition to those who list only one homeland (India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh) there are those whose stones

suggest conflicted identity. In Roseland Park, Niamat Ali (1900-1952) is from “Pakistan India.”

Worris Khan, born in 1899, moves in the opposite direction, identifying his place of birth as

Pakistan, a country that would not exist for

another 48 years. Md (Mohammed) Abdul Noor

(1953-2005) is described as Chairman and

“Freedom Fighter of Bangla Desh” (Fig. 24).

This refers to 1971 when Bangla Desh declared its

independence from Pakistan, an event that

produced horrible violence. Finally, Syed Hidayat

Ali (1916-1990) in United Memorial Gardens lists both Hyderabad and Karachi. In 1947 the

Muslim ruler of Hyderabad, located in the heart of India, announced that he was opting to

become independent under the British partition plan, in spite of his Hindu majority population.

He was soon overthrown, with many Muslims fleeing across the continent to Pakistan. Michigan

was Ali’s fourth identification.

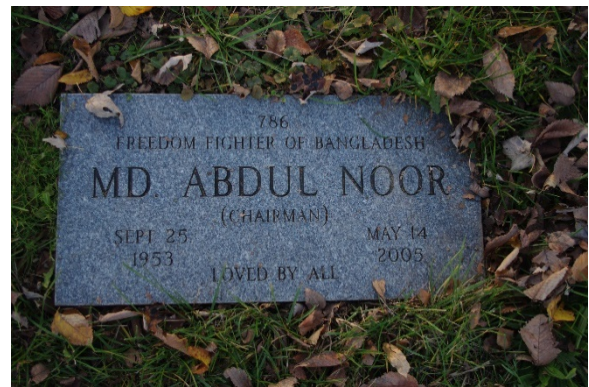


Fig. 24. MD. Abdul Noor,  
Roseland Park Cemetery

Some stones from these countries also have an item of curiosity, a number. The Abdul Noor stone has 786. This is linked to a practice (*abjad*) of assigning numerical values to Arabic letters. (There is a similar practice among Jews.) The number-letter linkage means that a word can have a numerical value or that a number can substitute for a word. The number 786 is the numerical value of the *Bismillah*, the opening sentence of the Koran. Because the *Fatiha* is recited when visiting a grave, 786 on a gravestone is asking that the visitor pray for the soul of the deceased. Some Dawoodi Bohra graves have 786/110. The 110 refers to Ali, cousin and son-in-law to Mohammed, and here to the Shi’a. Less common is 92, which refers to Mohammed.

Another group affected by the partition of India were the Ahmadiyya. This small group originated in the town of Qadian in northern India in the late 1800s. Their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) claimed that the true Islamic faith had been lost and he was the promised Mahdi (or Messiah) sent to correct and reform it. They embrace all the traditional teachings of Islam (the oneness of God, the prophethood of Mohammed, the Pillars of the Faith, the Koran) but because of the claims of their founder they have been seen as heretics or even apostates. They are persecuted in Pakistan and other places. As with others in 1947, the Ahmadiyya experienced sectarian massacres and expulsions. The town of Qadian was hit hard. The head of the movement asked 313 spiritual leaders to remain behind to look after the property and the religious needs of those who stayed. These are viewed as heroic individuals who were willing to risk their own lives to help others. Their small burial section in Mount Hope Memorial Gardens



Fig. 25. An Ahmadiyya Couple, Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens

contains the grave of Subedar Abdul Ghafour Khan (Fig. 25). He is identified as number 175 of that 313. The Ahmadiyya also have a custom whereby individuals can write their will to favor the community. These wills are called *wassiyat*. Mrs. Khan, Amtul Habib Begum, is identified as writing such a will, the number being listed. The

text on the stone is from *Surah Al Fajr*, promising a reward in heaven to a virtuous person.<sup>32</sup>

Both of these are significant people.

## **Final Thoughts**

I am a political scientist so for me a key question is whether Muslims constitute a political category. My default assumption is that any cultural or religious or ethnic group is probably so internally divided that their unity exists at a symbolic level, not connected to political behavior. What I discovered in conducting this research is that while there is a religion called Islam, in a cemetery there is no single definition of a Muslim. This becomes obvious as one sets out to document the exceptional internal diversity of the Muslim communities in the Detroit area. Hopefully this article, which I see as a detailed (and perhaps engaging) briefing document, will help readers become more aware of the complexity of the Muslim community, its history, its ethnic diversity, and its religious traditions. Many details or elaborations were intended to address important issues that are misunderstood or largely overlooked by the outside world. We are ill-served by headline news stories or ideological constructs that blur or distort reality and reduce complex situations to simple ones. This is an exceptionally diverse community crossing nations, continents, and even religious traditions. It is also a community in transition. Identities and styles of expression vary dramatically by historic era, by location within the broader society, and by class. These are changing even now. While there are some over-arching Islamic symbols and texts, the images in this article are less of Islamic graves than of Muslim graves. They are the graves of individuals expressing their personhood and their identities – collective and individual – on their gravestones and markers.

My second goal was to generate a humanization process, humanization both for the reader and for the Muslims. I wanted the reader to experience what I had experienced. One marker that is hard to forget is of Baby Vicky (Fig. 26). Victoria Fatima Baiz (1918-1919) was only a year old when she died. Given her year of death, she may have been taken by the influenza epidemic. Or perhaps



Fig. 26. Victoria Baiz  
Roseland Park Cemetery

she just died of those things that took so many young lives in those days. We know almost nothing about her. Even her name is ambiguous. Baiz is a Moroccan name, Arabic but possibly suggesting historic converts from Judaism. Her middle name could suggest Catholic Hispanic heritage (Our Lady of Fatima) or Shi'a religious identity. (The Shi'a Fatimid dynasty, so-named in honor of Mohammed's daughter Fatima, ruled much of North Africa for over two centuries). Vicky is buried near other Muslim babies, but also among Christian babies. Were it not for the presence of a Baiz family stone nearby, we could not even be confident that she is a Muslim. We do know that she had one or more siblings and that her parents loved her enough to choose a heart-shaped stone with flowers to show their enduring embrace. Today, a century later, we see a stone, mixed in with other baby stones in the Babyland section of Roseland Park Cemetery. Each of those children was a precious soul to the families that loved them, dreamed of their future, and was devastated to have them taken. Today the parents are gone and the siblings are gone. What remains is a gravestone. It is the gravestone of a tiny girl, buried among the graves of other tiny children, almost but not quite lost to history.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank a host of colleagues, friends, and students who helped translate and explain the stones and the traditions behind them. Special thanks go to Shahad Atiya, Suha Ali, Nabilah Kachab, Mallie Abdul Hadi, Damir Vucicevic, Pam Yaacoub, Eide Alawan, Hashem al-Tawil, Najah Bazzy, Ana Ćuković, Elif Cila, Nada Mansour, Shadia Martini, Mohammed Alcodray, Muna Aldhalimy, and Renna Hatahet, most of whom walked cemeteries with me. Several community leaders lent support and encouragement. Among them are Imam Ali Elahi, Imam Mohammed Radwan Mardini, Imam Dawood Walid, Dervish Eliton Pasaj, Victor Begg, Ishmael Ahmed, Nurten Ural, and Ron Amen. Jane Stockton is in a category of her own. She was involved at all stages of this project from walking cemeteries to discussing the stones to critiquing the paper to preparing the Figures.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Koran* see 3:18 (statement faith), 20:14 (prayer), 7:156 (charity), 2:185 (fasting), and 2:27-28 (pilgrimage). See also 2:177 for a broader summary of what is expected of the believer, *The Holy Koran*, trans. ‘Abdullah Yusuf’ Ali (Brentwood, Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989, originally translated in 1934). Muslims from all lands share foundational events, doctrinal affirmations, and ritual practices. Arabic is a unifying liturgical language. But beyond these, there is little common framework within which all Muslims function. Moreover, three events of recent decades have buffeted the local community: the Iranian Revolution of 1979; the influx of Shi’a refugees from southern Lebanon in the aftermath of the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982; and the influx of refugees from southern Iraq after decades of war. These events shifted elements of the large Arab Shi’a community to a more religious focus.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin C. Christiano, William H. Swatos, Jr., and Peter Kivisto, *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments* (New York: Altamira Press, 2002), 155; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 504; Barbara Aswad, “Arab Americans: Those Who Followed Columbus,” 1992 Presidential Address, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 27 (July, 1993): 6. <http://jstore.org/stable/23061491>.

<sup>3</sup> As with Jews, Muslim religious authorities prefer that believers be buried in separate cemeteries. But as a backup plan burial is permitted in a public cemetery so long as the Muslim



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section is separated in some way, perhaps by a path or hedge. In reality, many Muslim graves are mixed in with non-Muslims, although in recent decades as the number of Muslims increased their communities have purchased designated sections of larger cemeteries. Of the cemeteries or cemetery sections included in this research, only two were dedicated Muslim cemeteries. Both are of recent origin.

<sup>4</sup> There is an old Muslim population in the Detroit area going back into the 1800s. The size of the population today is probably around 200,000. Some are third- and fourth-generation Americans but 58% of adults were born overseas. They have come for a variety of reasons. Some are highly trained engineers and doctors. Some are poor and hope to restart their lives in America. Some were oppressed or fled invasions or civil wars. Pew Research Center, “Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans,” <http://PewForum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-Muslim-Americans> offers a national overview. Pew reports that 24% of all Muslims have three generations of American heritage. Twenty percent are African Americans and 21% are converts. Of the immigrants 25% are Arabs, 35% are South Asian, 23% are from Iran or Indonesia, 9% from Sub-Saharan Africa, 4% from Europe, and 4% from the Americas. There are several good overviews of American Muslims. One is Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idelman Smith, eds., *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). It has chapters on Shi’a mosques in Dearborn, the Bektashi and the Old Turks, as well as the Nation of Islam, and African Americans. Sally Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering the Muslim America Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) is a study of over a century of mosque and community evolution. A different approach is found in a project on which I was one of two Principle Investigators: Detroit Arab American Study Team, *Citizenship and Crisis: Arab Detroit after 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage, 2009). It is based on interviews with 1,016 people of Arab-world origin (56% of whom were Christian). Pew estimates that there are 3.35 million Muslims in the U.S., about 1% of the population, see Pew Research Center, “A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population,” <http://www.Pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/.../a-new-estimate-of-the-U-S-Muslim-Population>, January 6, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> One approach is to focus upon the post-9/11 security state. See American Civil Liberties Union, *A Call to Courage: Reclaiming our Liberties Ten Years After 9/11*, 2011, <https://www>.

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aclu.org/issues/national-security/privacy-and-surveillance/call-courage. Thinking of white racism and “people of color” would be another. See Nadine Nabor, “Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formation,” in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, eds. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Nabor (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press), 1-45. Looking at cultural stereotyping would produce yet a third. See Ronald R. Stockton, “Ethnic Archetypes and the Arab Image,” in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994): 119-151. A very different approach is to think of Muslims in comparative historic terms. One interesting comparison is with mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Germans. Germany around 1850 was multiple countries with multiple subcultures. Germans were Lutherans, Catholics, Calvinists, Pietists, and Jews. They were Bavarians, Prussians, Hessians, Saxons, and East Prussians, groups quite different from each other in their cultures and dialects. And in time, Germany became an enemy state, putting pressure on those of German heritage to affirm their Americanness. All these divisions are found among Muslims today. For a discussion of Germans in America see La Vern J. Rippley, *The German Americans* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984). For how Germans navigated the complexities of American society see Robert H. Wiebe, *Who We Are: A History of Popular Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Yet another approach, focusing upon a religio-ethnic group and how their culture and gravestones evolved, was done by Thomas Rust who studied Dutch Calvinists in Montana from 1890-2008. They evolved a “selective accommodation, while maintaining a distinct community flavor” involving “both personal and collective group identity.” See Thomas C. Rust, “Losing Its Sharp Edge: Changing Group Identity in the Gravestones of Montana Dutch Calvinists, 1890-2008,” *Markers XXIX* (2014): 78-107. Rust found that their religious identity evolved from Christian Reform to “Christian.” This is similar to what Gordon found when looking at ethnic groups in the 1950s and 1960s. He discovered that sub-group differences declined over time in favor of broader categories. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origin* (New York: Oxford, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> This article is about gravestones but burial customs deserve an informational note. Muslim burial customs are remarkably similar to Jewish customs. In a traditional burial, the body is washed by volunteers, put in a shroud, and placed directly in the ground without embalming.

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The burial is within a day if possible. Men preside. For those returned to their homeland for burial, Muslim undertakers collect the body and arrange transport. There is no open-casket viewing. There is a procession to the gravesite. There are ritual observances after the burial at prescribed intervals. In the Shi'a tradition, these would be on the 7<sup>th</sup> day and 40<sup>th</sup> day. Some Sunnis prefer 40 days and one year. For rich insights into burial customs during the first few centuries of the Muslim age see Leor Halevi, *Muhammed's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

In reality, many American Muslims have adopted local customs such as visitation and open casket viewing. In some cases visitation is in the mosque. Regarding burials, Muslims comply with state and local regulations. Few cemeteries permit burial without a casket. In many cases, the custom of direct burial in the ground is honored by sprinkling some dirt onto the body before sealing the casket. If the grave is properly aligned (56 degrees ENE), with the body laid on its right side, it will be facing Mecca, as in prayer. Some Shi'a rest the head on a small lump of clay from Najaf in Iraq where great religious figures are buried.

<sup>7</sup> Imam means the person who leads prayer. It is a term favored by the Shi'a community. Sunnis prefer the term sheikh. We will use the term Imam throughout this article. Howell, *Old Islam*, offers a detailed exploration of the history of these congregations and the imams who lead them.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this distinctive neighborhood see Sameer Abraham, Nabeel Abraham, and Barbara Aswad, "The Southend: An Arab Muslim working-class Community," in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, eds. Sameer Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, Center for Urban Studies, 1983), 163-84.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed Karoub (1924-1998) was commonly known as Mike. Like his father he was open to different branches of Islam and to non-Muslims. He headed the American Muslim Bekaa Center (a mosque) in Dearborn. His gravestone in Oakland Hills Memorial Garden in Novi identifies him as the first Imam born in the United States.

<sup>10</sup> Islamic Center of America, *50<sup>th</sup> Golden Anniversary, 2012*, available at the mosque. For further information on the Imam and his community see Howell, *Old Islam*, chapter five, and Linda S. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American*

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*Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1997). A national perspective is Liyakat Nathani Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). A valuable book by a local Imam is Hassan Qazwini, *American Crescent: A Muslim Cleric on the Power of His Faith, the Struggle Against Prejudice, and the Future of Islam in America* (New York: Random House, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Mohammad Jawad Chirri, *Inquiries about Islam* (Detroit: Islamic Center of America, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Howell, *Old Islam*, has information on the Imam. See chapter five.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Trix, “Bektashi Tekke and the Sunni Mosque of Albanian Muslims in America” in Haddad and Smith, *Muslim Communities*, 359-380. For a more in-depth look, see Francis Trix, *The Sufi Journey of Baba Rexheb* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Bilgé, “Voluntary Associations in the Old Turkish Community of Metropolitan Detroit,” In Haddad and Smith, *Muslim Communities*, 381-405.

<sup>15</sup> Bilgé notes that this early Turkish community left few descendants who identified as Muslims or Turks. In a sense they “evaporated” (p. 390).

<sup>16</sup> Francis Trix, *Albanians in Michigan* (Discovering the Peoples of Michigan, Michigan State University Press, 2001). During the Communist era (1945-1990), religion was suppressed. Today Albania is a secular state, although according to the 2011 census a majority (57%) are Sunni Muslims with 18% Christian, 2% Bekhtashi, and 22% expressing no identity. See [www://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albania#religion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albania#religion).

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to my colleague Ilir Miteza for his insights on this stone. The passage is from <http://www.Poemhunter.com/poem/TheWordsOfTheCandle>. There is no translator identified.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to my former students Damir Vucecivic and Ana Ćuković for insights.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Wheatcroft. *The Enemy at the Gate: Hapsburgs, Ottomans and the Battle for Europe* (London: Random House, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Nurten Ural for background on this community.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to my colleague Thaddeus Radzilowski for background on this topic.

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<sup>22</sup> Pew, “Muslim Americans.”

<sup>23</sup> Philippe Aries. *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 55. He discusses styles of expression.

<sup>24</sup> There is an extensive literature on African American Muslims. See Christine Kolars “Masjid ul-Mutkabir: The Portrait of an African American Orthodox Muslim Community,” in Haddad and Smith, *Muslim Communities*, 475-500, on orthodox Islam.; Mattias Gardell analyzes the Nation of Islam in “The Sun of Islam Will Rise in the West: Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam in the Latter Days,” *ibid.*, 15-50; Yusuf Nurrudin has an analysis of a heterodox organization in the same volume, “The Five Percenters: A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths,” 109-132; Ernest Allen, Jr. analyzed “syncretic Islam” in “Identity and Destiny. The Formative Views of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam,” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (eds.), *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163-214; and Sherman A. Jackson discussed how African-American Islam has been distorted by immigrants in “Black Orientalism: Its Genesis, Aims and Significance for American Islam,” in Philippa Strum and Danielle Tarantolo (eds.), *Muslims in the United States* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 21-38;

<sup>25</sup> Thanks to my late colleague, Ahmad Rahman, for background on this subject.

<sup>26</sup> Personal communication, July 21, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication, July 21, 2017. The name Altheria has an interesting origin. It derives from the Arabic name for the Pleiades (Thurayya). There is a *hadith* (story of Mohammed) in which the Prophet uses it as a metaphor. In the popular culture of the day, the Pleiades were seen as the highest stars. Mohammed said to his companions, pointing to a Persian named Salman, “If faith were to go up to the Pleiades, a man from among these would surely find it.” This alludes to the fact that the Persians were the great scholars of the day. Today it is a female name. The Hadith is reported by Bukhari: [alislam.org/topics/messiah/index.php](http://alislam.org/topics/messiah/index.php). Thanks to Imam Ali Elahi for explaining this to me.

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to my colleague Rusi Sun for insights into this community. She says the Hui are fully Chinese in every way and are not marginalized.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Boosahda, *Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 31, 37. There appears to be a triple dynamic regarding where people are buried. Most local people want to be buried locally. Some from distant places with no Muslim cemetery appear to be coming here for burial among their co-religionists. And some want their remains shipped home. Peter Ho Davies, *The Fortunes* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2016) describes the Chinese experience. He says the Maoist revolution “made us Americans.” His point is that the Chinese in America were always sojourners who wanted to return home someday. But after 1949 when the U.S. and China broke relations, returning home was no longer possible. Burial in the U.S. was the only option. Hence, the Chinese became Chinese-Americans (174-175).

<sup>30</sup> Gail D. Hershenzon, *Detroit’s Woodmere Cemetery* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishers, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> They are AMS I, AMS II, Bosnian American Gardens, Beannibazar, Muslim Family Section, Greater Chittagong Association of Michigan, and Galapagong Shomity Michigan. Two others have Muslim graves clustered together but also non-Muslim graves. These are North Lake (Albanian) and the nearby Bekhtashi Kleri (clergy) burial site.

<sup>32</sup> Thanks to former students Zehra Imam and Yamna Qadri for assistance.

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