

## CHAPTER 5

### RITUALS AS OBJECTS OF ISLAMIC AUTHORITY

#### Rituals Observed at the Islamic Center of East Lansing

While living as a temporary resident in America, and as a practicing Muslim, I faced numerous challenges in performing daily prayers. These challenges arose because America is a secular nation, its weather is not conducive for a large part of the year to perform prayers while outdoors, and Islam, being a minority religion, was not well understood among the general populous. Back in Indonesia, the country of my origin, the laws require accommodation of the spiritual needs of the six major religions of the world, namely, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Muslims constitute the majority of the population. Whereas the goal of the Indonesian government is to provide equal accommodations for all, Muslim citizens tend to benefit the most in terms of worship facilitation and religious accommodation, owing to their higher numbers and more frequent daily religious rituals, as they pray five times a day. In America, a practicing Muslim tries to fulfill his or her religious obligations despite the lack of accommodation in public or other spaces. This lack of accommodation is invariably never deliberate; rather, it is owing to a lack of awareness and the scarce number of people who seek it. For practicing Muslims in America, they feel a dire need for religious accommodation, and where this is not provided, such as in work places and other public spaces, this is a tremendous inconvenience for those seeking to fulfill their spiritual obligation of offering their five daily prayers in a timely manner.

On university campuses such as at MSU, the provision of an assigned room wherein a Muslim could pray during school hours will go a long way toward accommodating Muslim students and employees. This is all the more significant at a big university like MSU, owing to the relatively high number of international students, many of whom hail from Muslim majority countries and are

accustomed to praying at designated times. Owing to the lack of such facilities, students like me, order to pray in a timely manner, had to find a space such as between corners or passages between buildings, or inside buildings in which to pray. There have been a few occasions while I was praying in full public view, and someone passed by. These situations filled me with guilt for performing a personal activity in a public place and possibly causing discomfort or disturbance to passersby. The noon and the afternoon prayers were the two rituals I had to offer while I was on campus. I used to work overnight in the library and had to offer my evening and late evening prayers there. During the winter months, when sunrise is quite late and sunset is rather early, this made it more difficult, because the dawn and sunset prayer schedule fell within typical business hours. During periods of severe weather, the prayer time sometimes lapsed when I was on the road. In other words, practicing Islamic rituals poses major challenges for Muslims who live in a country where there is very limited provision for appropriate public spaces, plus being in a minority status, combined with at times challenging climate conditions. If one happens to work near a mosque, this makes it easy for them to take a break from work and worship directly at the mosque.

The establishment of the Muslim religious facility in East Lansing fulfilled not only a basic need of a place for Islamic worship, but also several other social and educational needs. A series of improvisations and innovations have helped serve the needs of the area's Muslims. Some of the rituals that were improvised and which evolved into other daily routines and practices are detailed below.

1. **Prayer direction (*qibla*).** Many mosques that were built early in America directed the *mihrab* (a semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque where the Imam, worship leader, stands to lead the prayer) towards the southeast (S. F. Howell, 2009, p. 62). That was because in the past, many Muslims still used the plain Mercatorian maps that showed the direction from North America

to Saudi Arabia in a southeasterly direction. At the Albanian Islamic Center in Detroit, which I happened to visit once, there were two *mihirabs*: the old one that directed toward the southeast, and the one in use that directed toward the northeast. The Islamic Center of East Lansing was among the mosques built whose members used globe-based maps. In a globe-based map, as opposed to a Mercatorian map, the *qibla* is derived as the shortest distance from North America to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and this is in the northeast direction.

2. **Mosque interior.** As shown on the picture below, the interior at the Islamic Center of East Lansing is plain and lacks any ornamental decoration. Any fixture on the wall is not a decorative piece and simply serves a purpose, such as coat hangers or bulletin boards. There was not even signage instructing the people to turn off their phones in order to prevent those phones from going off during prayers. The purpose of this lack of adornment evidently was to avoid distractions and to help worshippers concentrate on their prayers. Meanwhile, many other mosques around the world still place accessorial articles on the walls, such as Qur'anic verses, or the words “Allah” and “Muhammad” in calligraphic style, or a sign directing worshippers to turn off their phones, or a clock situated above the *mihrab*.



Figure 18. Photograph: Main prayer hall of the Islamic Center of East Lansing

3. **The call to prayer (*azan*).** In predominantly Muslim countries, it is common to hear the *azan*, the call to prayer, blaring from mosques' loudspeakers five times a day. At the Islamic Center of East Lansing, the reach of the public speaker system is confined to inside the building, and no sound is audible outside the building. While churches and university campuses in America are traditionally known for their towers with bells that regularly ring to tell the time, the mosque *azan* was recognized as a noise disturbance (Leland, 2004). That is because American mosques were mostly built around residential complexes, where the communities were mostly occupied by non-Muslims. Many non-Muslims heard *azan* as nuisance to the neighborhood, so they would never encourage the reach of the *azan* outside the mosque. In Detroit, where there were more than fifty mosques, I have seen only two mosques that were permitted by a court to sound their *azan* outside the building. Alisa Perkins in her research reported eloquently how the permission was gained in the case of Al-Islah Islamic Center, one of such mosques di Hamtramck, Detroit, through a lengthy process involving public debates, media campaigns and interfaith events (Perkins, 2015).
4. **The mosque parking lot.** The City of East Lansing parking and code enforcement rules had a significant impact on activities in the mosque. Every building intended for public occupancy, including houses of worship, is approved for construction only after convincing the city's planning commission that adequate parking is made available. Any abuse of this code amounts to a violation of the code and subject violators to fines, and even the impounding of vehicles in violation of the code. That is why when the East Lansing mosque occupancy increased for the Friday congregational service, a decision was made to offer two services. While some professing a certain school of thought objected to holding two services on Fridays, this move greatly alleviated the overcrowding situation and eased the problem of a lack of parking availability.

5. **Attendance at Friday prayers.** By virtue of practice, Muslims coming from overseas are accustomed to attending the Friday congregation prayer without fail. This is because the Friday prayer is considered obligatory for every able adult male. Religious instruction was found in the *Sura* (chapter) 62<sup>nd</sup>) of the Qur'an,<sup>51</sup> which was named *al-Jumu'a*, meaning *the gathering*. The same word was also used for the name of the day in Arabic, *yawm al-jumu'a*, the day of congregational prayer. And the mosque where prayers were regularly held was called *masjid al-jami'*, mosque for *jumu'a* prayer. As a prescribed gathering, Friday prayers must be held in a public congregation. So, if a public gathering cannot be assembled owing to problems such as weather, safety, or disasters, or for various major logistical reasons, then the weekly prayers could be called off and the people would simply observe the noon prayers individually at home. Friday prayers in East Lansing have historically never been called off, although it is potentially possible owing to some of the reasons cited above.
6. **Politics in rituals.** Being instructed as a public event, Friday prayers also were not removed from political dynamics. Historically speaking, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, did not hold this prayer when the Muslims were minority in the city of Mecca. Only after receiving an endorsement from the people of Yathrib (earlier the name of the city of Medina), and he arrived safely after traveling the so-called *hijra* (the emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD), he began holding Friday prayers in Medina. After that, Friday prayers became a weekly routine. In East Lansing, the early Friday prayers were held at the MSU's Union or the International Office building by acquiring a permit to use the room for this purpose. It is considered permissible for one to pray noon prayers individually on Fridays when a congregation cannot be assembled.

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<sup>51</sup> The Qur'an consists of 114 chapters of different lengths that total 6,236 verses (Ringgren & Sinai, 2017).

7. **Gender in Friday prayers.** Friday prayers are considered obligatory only for males, which signifies the patriarchal character of the Islamic social system, wherein females are not obligated to join (Ahmad, 2013; Bowering, 2012, pp. 177-178). At the Islamic Center of East Lansing, as in most other cities across the US, Muslim women are equally enthusiastic as men in attending weekly prayers. In this mosque, the number of female congregants during Friday prayers was about half of that of the males. The community's female members had been as active as the males in attending the Friday prayers. This is not to say that those who stay at home during the Friday prayers are uninterested in attending. Based on my observations, they did not attend mostly because they had to work or take care of domestic chores or simply did not have the means of transportation to attend.
  
8. **Sermons' themes.** The mention of global politics sometimes caused tension during the Friday prayers. In some cases, this unsettled the audience, as they did not agree with what was being said in the sermons. Shaikh Omar told me a personal story following the American military operation that took place in Iraq in 1991.<sup>52</sup> In 1991, he decided to come back early from a family visit to Jordan after receiving a call from Tariq Akhtar, the president of the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing's president during that time. Akhtar said that the mosque community of Lansing was breaking up following disagreements about the American military presence in Saudi Arabia and the attack on Iraq that followed. Once back in Lansing, Shaikh Omar delivered sermons for a few Friday prayers to cool down the tension. His main message to the congregation at that time was that quarrels gave no benefit to anybody, and that the people in the Middle East did not care about what they were disagreeing about in Lansing. Regarding Friday sermons, Shaikh Omar

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<sup>52</sup> US-led Allied Forces launched Operation Desert Storm in January 1991 to free Kuwait from an Iraqi invasion. The operation base was on the Saudi Arabian areas bordering Iraq, a fact which caused debates among Muslim scholars regarding the use of Muslim land by a non-Muslim army as the base from which to attack another Muslim country.

explained again the neutrality principle as noted in his interviews above. He told me about his advice to the imams of Friday prayers to refrain from speaking about certain rituals that lacked consensus or had room for varied opinions. He suggested that the sermon speakers avoid speaking about any controversial issues. Controversial topics could be discussed in lectures and classes. As an example, he did not recommend the topic of moon-sighting debates (there is varied opinion on whether to follow calculations or sight the new moon with the naked eye to determine the beginning of a lunar month) for a sermon, in order to avoid someone in the audience standing up to protest, which could make him consequently defeat the purpose of praying to seek spiritual gain. Omar suggested instead talks about education, social services, or other general teachings of Islam.

9. **Additional supplications.** During the 2008-2009 Israeli attack on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Friday prayers in East Lansing added a special supplication called *qunut nazila*<sup>53</sup> to the congregational Friday prayers, as well as to some other daily prayers. This addition was made to express the community's deep sorrow and mourning over a calamity in other parts of the world. In some cases, the supplication was emotional, as the person leading the prayer wailed, and a impassioned rendering of words of mourning made it feel touching even for non-Arabic speaking congregants such as me. It evoked a depth of sadness and compassion in the congregants' hearts. It reminded me of similar supplications about fifteen years before, during the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia that took place between 1992-1995, when I was back in Indonesia. This additional

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<sup>53</sup> *Qunut* as a normal part of ritual is practiced daily at dawn (*fajr/subh*) prayers by the followers of the Shafi'i school of Islamic law, and by all Muslims during the night prayers of Ramadan month. This supplication is called *qunut nazila* if it is recited with other prayers like the Friday prayers during the times of calamity. The Prophet, peace be upon him, began this tradition when his army suffered a defeat at the Battle of Uhud (625 AD). Having the same core wording as the regular *qunut*, *qunut nazila* also allows it to become longer depending on the imam's memorization of the supplication collection. Wordings of *qunut nazila*: <http://www.zamzamacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Qun%C5%ABt-alNazila.pdf> accessed on March 7, 2017.

supplication is a sparingly practiced in Islamic tradition, meaning that it would not be allowed by most congregants if there was no widely felt impact. As is widely known among Muslims, an illegitimate addition in ritual matters was called *bid'ah*, a negative label of heresy that could lead to violent conflicts among Muslims.<sup>54</sup>

10. **Mosque and its non-Muslim neighbors.** The American secular system regulated worship places like mosques based on measures of safety and for administrative reasons. Mosque buildings had to meet all requirements of security and safety set by authorities and those agreed upon by the zoning commissions of the cities and townships before acquiring their approval to build a place of worship. It was not uncommon if a mosque plan was cancelled or rejected if some part of the requirements was not fulfilled. However, sometimes the challenges also came from anti-Muslim segments of the population who spread fear about the growing presence of Muslims in America. America's leading civil rights advocacy group, American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU), found that the emotional rejections were often camouflaged behind propagandist reasons aimed at making the building of mosques difficult if not impossible. For Muslim citizens of Lansing, they had to accept the fact that they were a minority in the city. Similar to the situation undergone by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, during the Meccan period, East Lansing Muslims had to realize that there was another requirement to build a mosque: the emotional connection with the surrounding community. In the case of the East Lansing mosque, Shaikh Omar told me a story how his cohorts reached an agreement with the surrounding neighborhood for the expansion of the mosque. In one instance, a neighbor always came to the city's hearings about this mosque to express his full support for the mosque community, for two reasons: he had some

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<sup>54</sup>Bid'ah is described in the entry of "Innovation." See the definition: ("Innovation - Oxford Islamic Studies Online," n.d.), <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1037> (accessed March 7, 2017).



good Muslim colleagues who worked for the Detroit carmaker, the Ford Company, and here in East Lansing he often received help from some Muslim students who mowed his yard. In another instance, Omar and his friends met the leaders of the Baptist church next door at a dinner to extend to them the courteous offer of selling their church building to make way for the mosque parking expansion. Omar and his friends made the deal successfully in part because the Baptist church had already been losing most of its members.

11. **The mosque's increasing numbers.** The increase in the number of mosque buildings could have been caused by a friction within the mosque community could be followed by splits among its plural congregants. Sarah Howell reported how some mosque congregants in Dearborn split up following conflicts between two groups of different Middle Eastern countries of origin, resulting in the construction of another mosque by the one group who lost control of the older mosque.<sup>55</sup> So far, Lansing Muslims had been able to keep their diverse members united. But it is not impossible that such a split could happen at the East Lansing mosque if the ground situation changed and other factors drove the need to build another building for the Islamic Center. For example, if the growth of the number of Muslims in the city made it impossible to accommodate the number of worshippers served by the only mosque in East Lansing during Friday prayers, an idea of building another mosque could emerge. Since April 2011, Friday prayers here had to be held twice because the parking lot could not accommodate all the cars at the same time, even after utilizing a parking facility owned by the University Lutheran Church next door. If the situation worsens in the future, the community might have to think about building another mosque in another part of the city. For the purpose of unity, the classical tradition of Islamic

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<sup>55</sup> In this case, Howell described a story of how the control of the Dix Mosque in Dearborn was transferred from the Lebanese to the Yemeni Muslims (S. F. Howell, 2009, Chapter 3).

ritual prescribed Friday prayers to be held one time on a particular Friday in one place in a village. Now the dual observance of Friday prayers in one mosque has become an acceptable norm, despite the fact that, technically, half the community would no longer meet weekly with the other half of the brothers and sisters of the congregation. The Executive Committee of the mosque partially addressed this concern by assigning the same person to deliver both sermons so that the same message is delivered to the entire congregation, even though the sermons actually occurred at two separate times. Still, the imam for the two prayers had to be different persons. Some persons told me they missed the beautiful voice of the imam because he had attended the other gathering. The difference of *Bilal*, the prayer callers, between the two prayers could also make for some odd feelings for some congregants. A student often performed the *Bilal* for the first batch. This left some people uncomfortable, while some others were pleased to see a young student being mentored in this role. But over time, this became the new routine among local Muslims' newly emerging traditions.

12. **Schedule of rituals.** Muslims determine their calendar based on the moon sighting throughout the year. But the timing of daily rituals was determined by the positions of the sun. In clear weather, a Muslim could determine the prayer times by him or herself. But such conditions are rare in cloudy Michigan. So, the congregants of the Lansing mosque relied mainly on the publication put out by their mosque administration. The ISGL policy on this matter was to follow the decision of prayer and fasting times published by the FCNA (Fiqh Council of North America), a council of Islamic law scholars formed by ISNA (Islamic Society of North America). In turn, FCNA used a variety of considerations, among which was the service of MCW (Moonsighting Committee Worldwide) under the leadership of a Maryland astronomer, Khalid

Shaukat, who focused on providing astronomical data for mosques and Muslim organizations.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, FCNA did not actually use all of MCW's calculations. To decide the day of Eid Adha (the feast of the pilgrimage), FCNA would refer to the decision of the Hajj authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>57</sup> The reason behind this policy was apparently unity and authority. So, while the dates of Ramadan fasting and Eid Fitr (the feast closing the Ramadan fasting) could be different between America and other parts of the world, the decision of FCNA could not be different from that of the Hajj authorities. The Saudi Kingdom held authority over the schedules of pilgrimage, which other Muslim countries from around the world had to follow. Therefore, it would be strange if they celebrated the feast on day different from that of the Saudis. In the years between 2014 and 2018 Muslims in America had been observing Ramadan fasting around the summer solstice, especially when most of the days were in the months of June and July.<sup>58</sup> During this period, the long daylight hours would make them refrain from any food or liquid intake for about 15 to 17 hours. According to a calculation, Muslims who lived above the 48° of geographical latitude would have to endure up to 23 hours. On the Youtube website, there were some video clips showing some immigrant families in the northern Scandinavian countries who chose to endure this hardship. Considering this situation, FCNA scholars have re-analyzed the *fatwas* (Islamic law opinions) regarding this matter and have come out with a pragmatic consideration. Jassir Auda, one of the FCNA scholars, wrote an article that read, in part:

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<sup>56</sup> Khalid Shaukat is an American astronomer who graduated from the Georgia Tech University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA in 1970. See: ("Moonsighting.com," n.d.)

<sup>57</sup> In the Islamic science of astronomy, there are two opposing methods of calendar determination: *ru'ya* (direct sighting) using telescopes, and *hisab* (calculation). The Lansing mosque prefers the second, which has determined the estimated dates of Ramadan and other feasts up to 2021 and beyond. See: [www.lansingislam.com/an1.htm](http://www.lansingislam.com/an1.htm) accessed March 7, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Considering that the summer solstice in Lansing falls on June 21, I emphasize here the period one month before and after that date: May 20 until July 20. See: ("Sunrise and sunset times in Lansing," n.d.) accessed March 8, 2017.

... fasting does impose some physical hardship on the believer and does require patience and perseverance. However, it is not an objective for fasting to be incapacitating to the believer to the extent of not performing necessary religious, family, social, or professional duties. This is definitely the situation of people who will fast for up to 23 hours for the whole month. (Auda, 2011)

He also used an interpretation of the holy text to provide an alternative for understanding the message behind the religious obligation. A few other *fatwas* suggested a strict observance despite the hardship. But he offered his analysis based on the interpretation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, the 187<sup>th</sup> of the Quran, which suggests that such a hardship should not be imposed. With a variety of legal justifications, he ended up making some choices to observe Ramadan fasting within the limit of a human's health. First, a Muslim could follow the fasting time range according to the calendar of Mecca and Medina. Secondly, he or she could fast according to the calendar of the closest region, ones having moderate times. Third, one could undertake fasting beginning from the *fajr* (dawn) for a maximum of sixteen hours, based on the area of 45° of latitude. And according to a fourth alternative, a Muslim could fast from *fajr* to a maximum of eighteen hours, based on the 48° of latitude (Auda, 2011). These alternatives detached the practice of Ramadan fasting from traditional habits, and not from the classical tradition at all. The fasting times, which used to look at the positions of the sun, was now allowed to consider individuals' ability to fast or preference for fasting between certain hours. In any case, among those four choices, a person could offer dawn prayers hours before starting the fast and hold a sunset prayer after breaking the fast. In normal places, it was the opposite, in which he or she would conduct dawn prayers immediately after starting the fast and do sunset prayers immediately after breaking the fast.

Based on the same justifications, a Muslim in Lansing technically could apply the alternatives on him or herself. In the context of the spirit of the community, however, individual choices normally did not override communal agreements. As in the case of the East Lansing mosque:

Ramadan fasting was usually marked with daily gatherings for breaking the fast together in the Center, and people tended to agree on the choice of the prescribed fasting schedule. On this issue, Shaikh Omar told a story set around 1985 or 1986, in which one of his fellows insisted on following the schedule of the Saudi scholar, Shaikh Muhammad Ibn Baz. Finally, they agreed to consult directly with the Saudi *shaikh*. They gathered in the mosque office one evening, then used the office phone to call the Saudi *shaikh*. After a couple of tries, they finally got connected with the office of Shaikh Muhammad Ibn Baz. After listening to the question from Lansing, the voice from Saudi office said, “Follow MSA, don’t divide between yourselves, for God’s sake. This is not big issue.” So, somehow the Saudi people already knew about MSA by 1986. Thus, local tradition prevailed.

### **Lessons Learned**

As explained in the previous chapters, the formation of the Muslim community in Lansing was a result of encounters among individuals who happened to share the same interests in practicing some aspects of Islamic teachings. On the campus of Michigan State University (MSU), where the greatest number of Muslim members interacted with one another in close proximity, these shared needs were easily visible. The concerns and wishes in everyone’s mind grew and this was shared among all of them and together they began to hold Islamic rituals. After a decade, they ended up building a mosque and establishing an institution: the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing (ISGL).

But they came from different countries of origin and different levels of Islamic understanding. As a way of life for many nations, Islam had adopted many local cultures, albeit accessorial or supplementary, on the grassroots level after having been practiced in a variety of cultural contexts

for many centuries on different continents.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, the Muslim newcomers from the Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African countries, who dominated the number of Muslims in the city, would have different stories regarding Islamic practices as their minds still had memories that originated from the religious practices in their lands of origin. In their new mosque here, however, it would be difficult to accommodate those differences if the variety of Islamic traditions were to be preserved together in the only one place of worship that they just built. So, they needed to practice only the shared parts of Islam if they wanted to keep all Muslims together in the new community. As a result, the Islamic Center became a unique place where shared traditions took precedence and people set aside their individual practices.

As the Islamic Center had been established as a site of Islamic authority, it constituted a human-created institution that had the power to select and decide on a variety of existing practices that eventually formed two scenarios: those that would be continued for common gatherings and ones that would not. The Center's organization, ISGL, began to produce rules, either in written form, such as a constitution, or unwritten ones that were implied from the common routines. Whether or not it could lead to a stable production of normative traditions, this process had made the Muslim community center into a place where all cultures could come together to engage with one another and celebrate as one. So, instead of losing its authority in the face of globalization, as indicated by some scholars (Mandaville, 2007; Roy, 2004), the phenomenon that we have called here the *territorialization* of Islam in a Muslim community center had signaled an opposite trend. Further, whereas those scholars described the symptoms of "deculturation" (Roy, 2004, p. 259) for Muslim

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<sup>59</sup> Clifford Geertz, for example, has compared the developments of Islamic cultures between the Muslims of Morocco and those of Indonesia, which showed the syncretic *illumination* or *maraboutism* of Islamic practices between the two peoples. That was followed by the rise of scripturalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a form of belief that was brought by pilgrims coming home from the Middle East. (Geertz, 1971)

immigrants who had been detached from the context of their original culture, we can call the production of rules and norms within the Islamic Center a *reculturation*.

There is some truth in saying that globalization could cause Muslims to undergo what is the so-called “functionalization,” “respatialization,” and “mediatization” of Islamic authority, because displaced Muslims no longer follow the “conventional understandings of religious knowledge, its location, and mode of articulation.”(Mandaville, 2007, p. 1) But such descriptions give a more chaotic impression than does the settling process of religious culture. With its ability to *recontextualize* the prescriptions of Islam on a piece of American land, the development of a normative culture in an Islamic center would be more suitable to be described as the emergence of “law” as defined by Geertz (2008) as local knowledge. Geertz wrote:

“Law, ..., is local knowledge; local not just as to place, time, class, and variety of issue, but as to accent—vernacular characterizations of what happens connected to vernacular imaginings of what can. It is this complex of characterizations and imaginings, stories about events cast in imagery about principles, that I have been calling a legal sensibility.” (p. 215)

Drawing from the general meaning of the word, Geertz defines law as the characterization of what exists and can imaginably exist based on local knowledge. Bringing this definition to the context of the Islamic Center in Lansing, the law of the community is derived from the compilation of its members’ understanding of their experiences. This spans the time of the initial efforts of setting forth Islamic practices; to the establishment of an Islamic society; and on to the future, when the community will presumably continue to record its memories. It is from these communal memories that rules are produced through the employment of what Geertz called legal sensibility. These communal rules will become a social tool that will contribute to the way communal life will evolve. As other scholars have pointed out, law is a constitutive part of culture (Mezey, 2001; Rosen, 2006).

As a part of a culture, Islamic traditions can be formed and enforced only if local situations and conditions allow it. In one country, the process of judicial production could be very simple in the hands of single judge in an Islamic court. Lawrence Rosen writes, "... a single judge ... in his personal discretion, in an instant of seemingly boundless might, could magically lift or permanently affix a burden that had been laying upon me and my neighbors ..." (Rosen, 1989). In another instance, the local case of Islamic matter could make its way to becoming legal dispute of at local or national levels through more complex social exchanges involving a variety of political campaigns, religious debates or economic rivalries (J. R. Bowen, 1993, 2003). Borrowing the terminology of social scholars, Islamic aspirations will turn into enforceable legal products through a rational process called public reasoning.<sup>60</sup> In the context of the development of Islamic law, Muslims' reasoning consists of three components. First, the existing members of a community should have in their practice of Islam something that can be shared among one another on an equal and voluntary basis. Second, there is an overlapping consensus, or a measure of acceptable commonalities among different interests that can be formalized for public benefits while keeping intact the equality and freedom of everyone. And third, there is enough of a collection of reasons to justify public actions, which is called the repertoire of justifications (J. R. Bowen, 2003).

Regarding shared practice, we can see that in a country with a long record of religious freedom, people are free to preserve their traditions, either revived or improvised. Considering this situation, we could generalize that the development of legal culture in this particular Islamic center consisted of at least three streams of tradition that were running parallel to one another. In this regard, different

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<sup>60</sup> The concept of public reasoning was launched by John Rawls through his theories of liberal citizenship and justice, a theory that argues that the establishment of a public institution should go through a variety of reasoning, which constitutes a type of overlapping consensus that gives benefits to individuals amid their various social and economic differences (Rawls, 2001, 2009).



traditions were sharing a place for the convenience of all in a non-intervening coexistence. The first category is the most common; this includes the great mainstream traditions that had been widely accepted by Muslims from the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, himself and his companions, which are basically kept the same despite multiple transmissions through different places and generations. They remained the same as they were carried on by the immigrants that attended various Islamic centers in American cities.<sup>61</sup> In the context of Lansing, the traditions of this category are few, since they are parts of the core traditions, so-called the pillars of Islam, as described in the previous chapter, and their implementation depended on the mosque's capacity. Of the five ancient traditions, the Islamic Center of East Lansing as an institution had provided various services for all except for the facilitation of those who wanted to follow the fifth ritual: *hajj* or the pilgrimage to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Despite its important record as a connecting factor in the spread of Islamic authority in the past (Geertz, 1971), this annual ritual today mostly began from personal initiative and has been fulfilled through personal efforts. Only a few have imams in America served as guides or companions for *hajj* and *umrah* (lesser *hajj*) all the way to Saudi Arabia, and if they do, they are mostly doing it in their personal capacities outside of mosque affairs.<sup>62</sup>

The second category of these traditions is the local improvisation, which could be come into being in either complementary or supplementary to the first category of traditions.<sup>63</sup> Inspired by the meaning of complementary and supplementary in the science of geometrics,<sup>64</sup> complementary

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<sup>61</sup> The term *great tradition* was proposed by Robert Redfield to describe parts of orthodox practices that were present in local contexts, in comparison to the *little tradition*, which was made only in a location (Faisal, 2011, pp. 1-27; Redfield, 1955, pp. 13-21).

<sup>62</sup> See for example Imam Tahir at: <http://www.imamtahir.com/site/> and Imam Mohamad Joban at: <http://www.arahmanhajj.com/> both accessed on 2/27/2017

<sup>63</sup> This is very close to the definition of *little tradition* as proposed above by Redfield.

<sup>64</sup> This is an analogy from geometry, in which angles are called complementary if they can be combined to make 90°, and supplementary if the angles can be combined to make 180°. See:

traditions are the ones that are needed to improve or to ease the implementation of the main traditions, without which the implementation of the main traditions would be seem incomplete or difficult to observe. For example, building a mosque is itself complementary since it is not compulsory. But a worthy mosque will guarantee the validity of prayers because it fulfills the concept of cleanliness, and congregants' collective safety from the forces of nature. Supplementary traditions are those that will add to the congregants' social life after the fulfillment of the main traditions. Unlike complementary traditions, which cause direct effects on the main traditions, supplementary traditions will bestow indirect benefits to the spiritual life of congregants. Learning circles and social gatherings between the prayers' sessions provide examples of such supplementary activities. Learning circles will not affect the validity or comfortability of prayer activities, but the transfer of knowledge, especially in an Islamic context, will improve the congregants' religious experiences, and can lead them to become more steadfast believers.

The third tradition is the one that has been set aside from the common congregation, as it is not fully shared among all attendees. This exclusive tradition is remains among groups of Muslims who still want to keep their inherited traditions within private forums. These traditions could be ethnic, such as those surrounding the ceremony of birth, the so-called '*aqeeqah*, or of marriage, the so-called *walimat al-ʿarush*, which are usually set up according to how the hosts of the events want them to be done, in line with the prescriptions of their countries of origin. They could also be sectarian, such as the traditions of the Shi'i School of Islamic law, which would become the minority inside a Sunni-inclined mosque. Another example is the traditions of the Tablighi Jama'at, a traveling caravan of people (Masud, 2000), who always held their meeting circles in other community's

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<https://wkar.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/gedgeo.geo.angles.ancomsup/angles-complementary-and-supplementary/>  
accessed on 2/27/2017

mosques and often used the main pulpit if allowed by the host congregations. Despite being a Sunni group, the Tablighi Jama'a people have behavioral routines that are normative for their own members. So, newcomers or uncommitted attendants need to adjust their attitude if they still want to comfortably join a Tablighi circle.

Regarding an overlapping consensus, this is one of the ways to harmonize the relationships among those three types of tradition in the context of an American city. In America and in many other democratic countries, equality and freedom of religious belief are protected, and all people residing the country are legally entitled to the preservation of their own culture and tradition. Because of that, agreements need to be extracted from disagreements among different groups of people who share the desire to form a unified community. Supporting Rawls' idea of overlapping consensus, Gerald Gaus explains:

The Kantian-Rawlsian solution to the problem of universal legislation under diversity of private judgment depends on the claim that public agreement can be insulated from deep disagreement on fundamental issues about how to live. We can put aside the matters on which we disagree, and reason simply on the basis of what we share (Gaus, 2010, pp. 38-39).

Agreeing with this reasoning, we can understand that the Islamic Center would have to allow the unshared traditions, the third category, to live in limited forums assigned for private events. The common public forums then would be filled with the first, the mainstream old tradition, and the second category, the improvisations of the old. They both support each other in order to establish an enforceable, local culture of Islam. When someone goes back to their country of origin, however, it is the first and the third that will come along on him or her, because the second is developed only for an American environment. Another instance of such a change will also take place when an ethnic or religious group holds a private event: here, the first and the third also will come along at the

expense of the second tradition. So, the meaning and assignation of the little tradition is contingent, dynamic and contextually, on the place and time.

Regarding the repertoire of justification, it is a discursive collection of reasoning that can be used to justify personal or communal actions. As a discourse, its scope has a dynamic characteristic: it can expand or shrink. In line with the definition of authority that consists of dynamic perpetuation of public interactions, the number of reasons that come up to legitimate an action can increase or become reduced depending on the complexity of the situation. When Lawrence Rosen commented that the legislation process in the countryside of Morocco in the 1980s was magical, it was because he did not see justifications other than the vulnerability of legal reasoning in the view of the local religious judge and the simplicity of the town's court. Whereas John Bowen, who did his research ten years later in the closely connected societies of Indonesia, saw many factors that could influence the final episode of a legal process. So, the first case witnessed a low number of reasoning in the local repertoire of justification, while the second case had to go through numerous reasoning processes, which indicates an expanded repertoire of justification.

In the case of the East Lansing mosque, we can see that basically all members of the community had a strong intention to build a religious institution that would serve their shared spiritual needs. In terms of consensus, the institutionalization of ISGL is proof that the community has made formed with an organization that includes a variety of activities that are aimed at accommodating various demands with an available place and time. And finally, the community's existence in a very complex social system in America and its heavy use of available technologies undoubtedly indicates the involvement of varied justifications for every action taken either by individuals or by the society in its institutional capacity.

The following section will elaborate further on instances that point out the observance of Sharia, that is, Islamic jurisprudence, at the Islamic Center of East Lansing.

### **The Reasoning of Ritual Improvisations**

The complexity of legal culture can be traced from discrepancies between the official rules and the actual practices of people. As described by Geertz, that law is local knowledge,<sup>65</sup> it includes the official statements and their vernacular discourse as uttered by the people. In an interview, Shaikh Omar tried to generalize the basic principles of public practices in the mosque, which describe the intentions behind the official statements of the constitution of ISGL. First, he said that after the establishment of the Center it was no longer a student community. Whereas the Friday prayers inside the campus area had been attended exclusively by students, the prayers in the new Islamic Center were attended by more varied segments of Muslim residents. In his words, the additional attendance, in addition to the students included:

... youth attendance, they are coming. They never came to the International Center before, the *halaqah* (study circles) which was there. Also, we realize many students are not stable here. They will stay one year, some two years, then go, sorry, because who cares. We have gotten their replacements, not necessary by students, but by others as well. Then added here, people are coming not from one country, but from many countries, especially the Indian and the Pakistani communities are the largest here. So, those are engineers, workers at the state, accountants, or doing some business here. Also, American converts who are working, have jobs, or some even without jobs. Then we have the professors at the university, who used to be not caring too much to attend the Friday prayers at the International Center, or the *halaqah* in Friday evening, but now with this big church, big mosque, they will come. All of them needed to be recognized in our activity. ...<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Geertz's *Local Knowledge*, Rosen's and Mezey's *Law as Culture* above.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Shaikh Omar Soubani, East Lansing, Feb 10, 2016.

From this description, community such as Shaikh Omar Soubani began to realize early that the university students' attendance in the Islamic Center was no longer the main segment of the congregants. The numbers of non-student residents who attended mosque activities grew into a number that balanced the number of the students, and exceeded that of the students, with the influx of professionals and immigrant workers.<sup>67</sup> This change indicated to the mosque activists' an orientation toward the future of the society. They would pay more attention to the interests of general congregants and to the surrounding society rather than to the needs of the university students. With this background, a passage on the ISGL's website reads:

Towards that goal, the Islamic Center holds congregational prayers, teaching circles, educational programs, and social activities. The Islamic Center provides Muslims and non-Muslims with advice and information about Islam. The Islamic Society of Greater Lansing is open to all and does not make any distinction based on denomination or sects.<sup>68</sup>

and its 1998 Handbook explains:

... One of the goals of the Society is to promote unity among Muslims and deepen their feeling of brotherhood. Towards that goal, the Islamic Center holds congregational prayers, teaching circles, educational programs, and social activities. At the same time, the Islamic Center provides Muslims and non-Muslims with advice and information about Islam.<sup>69</sup>

From a students' perspective, it seemed they could not maintain a powerful presence in the mosque because they often were temporary residents who would come and go. With an additional characteristic in which the leadership structure of MSA had to be reelected every one or two years, this dilemma would become a feature of the student organization. The students were pulled by different agendas, among their own study goals, the on-campus organization in the form of the MSA,

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<sup>67</sup>The increasing number of Muslims in Lansing was part of a positive contribution of immigration to the state's population, which otherwise would be shrinking amid the trends of decreasing birthrate and increasing death of aging Michiganders. See: [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/cgi/cgi\\_census\\_popest\\_slides\\_2011\\_375079\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/cgi/cgi_census_popest_slides_2011_375079_7.pdf) accessed on 03/05/2017.

<sup>68</sup> See the lower paragraph in the website: [www.lansingislam.com](http://www.lansingislam.com), accessed March 7, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> The 1998 Handbook of ISGL, Introduction.

and the off-campus organization in the mosque. Now they had ISGL besides MSA, and the students had to focus their attention on MSA activities, because there was nobody else that would attend to them, and they would have to let ISGL be taken care by the resident Muslims who would stay longer in the city. Consequently, there was a natural transfer of control within the mosque leadership, from Muslim students to the Muslim residents of Lansing. It was a smooth transformation of leadership from temporary hands to those of a more settled population. In Omar's words regarding this transformation, "So, we made it clear to ourselves, to honor the brothers who left and to honor the people who are there."

This intricate characteristic is also obvious in the second principle described by Shaikh Omar about the Islamic practice in the Center, as he commented:

... and to protect the future of the community that we should not touch areas where Muslims differ from each other. We have Shi'ah, we have [Ahl] Sunnah, we have Shafi'i, we have Maliki, we have Hanafi, we have the Hanbali, we have the Sufi, we have people who are likely attached to the religion, but not really caring much about it either, and so forth. That's the reality. This mosque should not be taken as Hanbali, or to be Shafi'i, or to be Sunni, or to be what?

In light of this, can we simply refer to it as American Islam?

Not American Islam. We say Islam as the *Sahaba* were, not divided. As Muhammad *sallallahu 'alayhi wasallam* [SAW] left them for the first generation. Not divided in taking the main teaching of the Quran and Sunnah. And then develop their understanding and act on it and making deeper study and more generation to follow the way of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. And why do we do that? Because there is no other masjid in the bigger town, or even the vicinity.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Shi'ah and Ahl Sunnah (Sunni) are the two largest theological factions of Islam. The Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbali are the four largest *madzhab*, the Islamic schools of law. Sufi is the religious quest of Muslims who place a greater emphasis on the mystic and ascetic aspects of Islam. The phrase *ṣalla Allāhu 'alayhi wasallam* ("may God's blessings and peace be upon him"), or more popularly, just "peace be upon him" (PBUH) is always recited by a person who observes the ethics after mentioning the name of the Prophet. *Sahaba* is the Companions, those whoever saw and learnt something from the Prophet. A further explanation can be seen, among others, in: <https://www.britannica.com> under the entries of Muhammad (prophet of Islam), Sunnite (Islam), Shi'ite (Islam), and Sharī'ah (Islamic Law).

Based on this description, the early leaders wanted to accommodate all Muslims who needed a place to observe prayers. For that purpose, neither the Society's handbook nor its constitution mentioned a sectarian affiliation for the rituals to be held in the mosque. So, by law, any Muslim of any sect would be welcome to use the available service in the Center, although in reality, the community was dominated by Sunni Muslims. But this would create a phenomenon of tensions because the legal provision advises an ideal situation of unity and brotherhood in the community, without prescribing a suggested preference for the actual practices that would be held in common forums.

So, the plurality of traditional backgrounds had been merged to form a common practice in public forums. Omar was proud of this because the need of unity and brotherhood was so critical. He acknowledged that he was a Sunni by theological doctrine and a Shafi'i in terms of Islamic jurisprudence. But if the mosque was to be declared a Sunni place of worship, he was afraid what to do with the Shi'i, or the Sufi fellows. Even if it was known that the mosque was dominated by Sunni Muslims, he did not want to announce the mosque's ritual preference towards, say, the Shafii or Hanbali school, because the other *mazhabs* would be alienated. He described an instance in which one day an Indian made a note for him that this mosque was unique because it did not formalize a sectarian preference. He also received a comment from a professor from Pakistan who asked about the position of mosque, because in his country the Muslims had different mosques for the Sunni groups, the Sufi brotherhood, and for the Shi'i. But Omar argued that the Lansing mosque was one for all because this was a better approach for the local situation. Then he argued:

... we are not like the Americans. There is a Baptist church, a Lutheran Church, this church, that church. Many churches here, people are divided here and there. But this is the only mosque. There



have to be some people who are open minded to accept others and to work with them. Because this is easily said, but not easy to do.<sup>71</sup>

So, Omar referred to American religious diversity to suggest that within its own dominant religion of Christianity, there was obviously a divided community. But his preference for non-sectarianism was not solely for ideal unity. It was because there was only one mosque available in the area that caused plural Muslims to keep the peace out of necessity while sharing a place of worship. Implicitly, he was hoping for a natural merging by saying:

... It is *hidayah*, it is guidance, it is open minded, it is not to create *fitnah*, not to tear other people, and not to have problem when they come, or when they leave, not to fight with each other, not to divide the community, because if you open this [mosque's] history, then this does not say it is Sunnah or Shi'ah. What was done in Saudi Arabia, how they had done it in Egypt, how they would do it in Pakistan, they were divided between Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbal. You are not open minded if you are not up caring about the future of the community. You will be divided more and more.<sup>72</sup>

So, he put the practice of local Islamic rituals into a global context by which Muslims had been scattered to different places and followed different theological sects and schools of Islamic law. He, and the other founding fathers of the city's Islamic Center had tried to pursue a mission of unifying Muslims' plurality in a shared Islamic center, where the rituals were to be negotiated on a daily basis. They had not come to formalize a certain preference of Islamic practice to transcend this plurality, but they were following that path by first refraining from putting a label on what was being practiced in the common hall of the mosque. The following section contains examples of those daily practices.

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Shaikh Omar Soubani, Feb. 10, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Shaikh Omar Soubani translates *hidayah* as guidance, and *fitnah* as a tear against other people. Interview with Shaikh Omar Soubani, Feb. 10, 2016.

## Reasoning New Islamic Traditions in America

Conjoining the words “Islamic tradition” and “America” for many people was like trying to popularize an oxymoron. That was because the earlier attempts of joining the word “Islam” with “America” had not been fully accepted by both sides. Even the meaning of being American and the meaning of being Muslim were still debated.<sup>73</sup> In this thesis, I am arguing that scholars need to decide how to move forward from the undeniable existence of Muslim citizens and their Islamic traditions within American culture. With this framework, the improvisation of Islamic traditions in the mosques of Lansing could be understood as a part of cultural processes that have moved toward the inclusion of Muslims into American citizenship.

Scholars of social sciences have observed cultural processes using different perspectives to explain how a variety of factors had been synthesized to survive an inherited religion in a new social environment. Andrew March, one of John Rawls’s followers in the field of political liberalism, scrutinized cultural developments among Muslims by posing three questions whose answers had to be revealed from the Muslims’ side: whether the new traditions indicated that their residency in a non-Muslim country had been legitimated by the Islamic texts, whether they proved a religiously sanctioned loyalty to their new nation, and whether they showed Muslims’ recognition to non-Muslims around them as fellow citizens and not merely potential converts (March, 2006, 2011). To respond to these questions, we can see the relevance of Mujahit Bilici’s work, which explained the Muslims’ efforts to make their religion part of American culture. Those efforts, according to Bilici, consisted of at least three factors: active participations in the campaigns of legal justice for American Muslim citizens, nurturing friendship networks and cooperation with other religious faiths, and vernacular familiarization of Muslims’ presence as a natural part of American society through

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<sup>73</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed has written two books using each of these two perspectives (Ahmed, 2007, 2010).

comedy shows in the public media (Bilici, 2012). Bilici's work described more about the externalization, or the outward embodiment of Muslims' presence in America, whereas March's questions demanded more regarding a transformation in the interpretation of Islamic texts. Muslim scholars have produced numerous works whose purpose is to reconcile Islamic legal prescriptions with the challenges of modern civilizations, particularly in the West.

How far can an Islamic tradition be adapted to a new land? Apparently, the direction of Islamic practice in America would depend on the possibilities available when Muslims are gathered in the prayer spaces and communal events in mosques. Harmonious gatherings would normally undergo the development of routines that would form the crystallization of a new Islamic tradition. Many scholars have seen indications that such a crystallization would lead to a culture that will "... represent both a continuity with the life and faith of the Prophet to his community and the emergence of a new entity with its own qualities and characteristics—a truly American Islam" (Afridi, 2001; Smith, 1999, p. 187). But this development also was dependent on the availability of the Islamic advisors serving their community in the mosques. These were the professional imams who would perform *fatwa*, a scholarly opinion on Islamic jurisprudential matters, in order to offer solutions to the problems faced by Muslims in their actual lives.