

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has attempted to describe the emergence of an Islamic authority in America based on the writer's understanding of his experience while living and working within the mosque community in East Lansing, Michigan. In Chapter One I argued that a student may acquire advanced knowledge of Islam without having to travel to foreign (including Arab) countries because the so-called centers of Islamic studies are now widespread and not limited to traditional centers of Islamic education. (For instance, I acquired Islamic knowledge in Indonesia but never attended an Islamic college in the Middle East.) I found among the community of East Lansing a mosque that has been moving toward becoming one such center of Islamic education. The population of the area's Muslims has exceeded five thousand, and the city's position between Detroit and Chicago, two host cities of longer-established and larger Muslim communities, help to explain the rise in the dissemination of Islamic knowledge and the steady growth of local mosques.

Such centers of Islamic learning, which emerged mostly after World War II in America, are different from the Oriental studies centers that have existed since the colonial era in American and European countries. While the Oriental studies centers were mostly initiated and sponsored by colonial governments, the current Islamic centers are a result of the activism of educated Muslim residents, including students, scholars and professionals who wanted to serve fellow Muslims and provide welcoming spaces for Islamic rituals and social activities. Chapter Two offered examples of such spaces, specifically, the Wali Mahmoud Mosque on Lahoma Street in Lansing, which was founded by former followers of NOI, and the Islamic Center of East Lansing (ICEL), which was founded by students such as Omar Soubani, Daniel Masters, and others.

As representatives of a growing Muslim community, ICEL leaders initially relied heavily on Middle Eastern resources for financial and intellectual support. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, however, such connections became limited. After Shaikh Omar's journey to Saudi Arabia in 2000, followed by the terrorist attack in New York City on September 11, 2001, the financial resources of the Center became practically domestic in origin. But such challenges proved to have a positive impact, as community members had to strengthen their degree of self-reliance and improve on nation-wide networks for the success of local fundraising events. Such hardships have also led to the emergence of various community leaders. Chapter Three presented my observation on the characteristics of the volunteers who have carried on this institutional upbringing. Besides noted figures like Shaikh Omar, who played a foundational role with his teaching and fundraising activities, there were others who played significant roles in the enhancement of friendly relations between the mosque and local communities, the organizational consolidation of the Center, the technological maintenance of the facilities, its culinary and educational services and the daily administration of the Center. An early sentiment of collectivity was apparent when members of the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) worked to limit the influence of the Arab Student Association (ASA), which was more politically oriented and more focused on Middle Eastern issues. Further, the collectivity among the Center's members was also enhanced by intra-marriages among their children, by the fact that some of them lived in the same neighborhood, the Center's purchase of cemetery clusters for Muslim corpses, the creation of an Islamic school, and the organization of both men's and women's activities. All of these groups and circles formed a general collectivity of the congregation, which was maintained through formal recognition from local governments, the recruitment of resourceful volunteers, and leadership reproduction through annual conventions.

In Chapter Four, I examined the features of community imams. Throughout the chapter, I presented the ways a Muslim might become such an imam. The first point presented was that the relationship between an imam and the mosque community in the case of East Lansing was mutual: the community sought the leadership of an imam (prior to the hiring of an imam, volunteers played various critical roles), and the imam (and others) benefited from the community's social resources. The second point was that the imam, as an authority on religious matters, could represent both individual and institutional authority. Between these individual and institutional forms of authority, local Islamic authority could expand toward at least three other forms of authority. In the case of the East Lansing mosque, there was a collective authority that could be seen in the group of Darul Qur'an teachers; the semi-institutional authority that could be seen in the management of Sunday School; and the autonomous authority that could be viewed in the Greater Lansing Islamic School (GLIS), which had its own management. During my participant observation, I have worked in each of these three forms of authority, so I have experienced myself how the paths toward leadership are generally open for Muslim community members who want to play specific roles in serving their religious community. In conclusion, the imamhood authority is expansive, and every Muslim can become an imam at a certain level and place.

In Chapter Five, I described how rituals in the Center underwent gradual objectification, which resulted from combined factors consisting of the distinct climate of Michigan, the Center's leaders' efforts to improve services for the congregants, and city regulations. In my records, there were twelve improvisations carried out by the Center's leaders who arranged public rituals; these improvisations served to alleviate risks to the congregants' state of health and comfort while avoiding violating the rights of neighbors and city regulations. Since I was a community volunteer for four years, I was involved in such practices. The lesson learned from this experience is that the knowledge

about local situation will shape religious practices and norms (Geertz, 2008), which will prompt the community to select which parts of religious teachings may remain intact and which others must be suppressed. In addition to these two categories, some new routines have also emerged to complement or supplement more traditional practices.

Comparable to what I observed in Indonesia, the main purpose of such improvisations was to make sure the mosque adequately serves its local community. However, to guarantee that the main purpose is maintained, the control of the mosque operation tends to be controlled by the majority, which, in this case, is by the Sunni members of the community. And finally, to make sure that the religious practices in this community are in harmony with the host society, the Center adopts modern and contextualized interpretations of Islam. Indeed, the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing has been able to successfully navigate amid the at times tumultuous relations between Muslims and the others in America. These relations were up and down depending on the situation, from the friendly acceptance of the 1965 immigration policy, to the tense climate following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and to the state of shock following the 9/11 terror attack.

Further, Muslim activists in the city of Lansing have succeeded in establishing the Islamic Center as a new territory that provides for its fellow immigrants to preserve some parts of their inherited culture while trying to integrate toward full American citizenship. The programs operating within the Center have encouraged mosque congregants to respond to the high demands for more cooperation with the surrounding environment and communities with some adjustments in their traditions in order to adopt American values, including democratic principles. Likewise, the ways in which the Muslim community's leaders introduced their religion and gave respect to existing rules has led the host society and local government to recognize an Islamic authority in the area and include the Muslims' traditions as part of the American way of life.

To reflect on the observations that have been described in this thesis, the first phenomenon to keep in mind is the Islamic Center's establishment in East Lansing as an indication of the *reterritorialization* of the Islamic tradition. In other words, this is an establishment of a new location for the cultivation of Islamic culture. The main reason for this stipulation is the difference in natural conditions. The area of Lansing presented generally different features of nature from those of Muslim-majority nations, at least in terms of climate and day-to-day timing. Whereas Muslim scholars historically permitted Islamic prayers to take place in any clean area, colder climates necessitate an enclosed brick and mortar building complete with walls and a roof. The timing of Islamic prayers also varies and changes nearly every day.

Here I must also mention the support of or cooperation with other communities. Contrary to the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Muslim-majority countries, Islamic movements emerged relatively recently in the United States, so the property required for Muslim communities was not to be acquired without support and cooperation from local churches and neighborhoods. Further, the role of non-Muslim government authorities over Islamic establishments is another determinant of reterritorialization. The US was already an established nation state when Muslims began to gather to create social groups in the form of organized movements. They basically did not have a share in the authorship of the Constitution and the American system of governance. So there were already many rules that Muslims had to follow in order to establish mosques and Islamic organizations.

The next reason to call it a reterritorialized Islam concerns the role of foreign sources of financial support in addition to local donors. Due to the complexities of building worship places and operating religious organizations, from the very beginning finances mattered. Whereas the Black Muslim movement found success in fundraising efforts and business networks, immigrant mosques

gained their initial support from foreign donors, without whom many Islamic centers established decades ago might never have been constructed. This process can be contrasted with the way Muslims established Islamic centers in Muslim-dominated countries, where the places of worship often had more humble beginnings before they eventually expanded.

Lastly, it is called a new reterritorialization of Islam because it followed a bottom-up pattern. In the history of Islam, the religion emerged from an extraordinary person, the Prophet Muhammad. His companions then spread and became teachers in different cities and established Muslim communities in wider regions. In America, Islamic movements seemed to grow more from good networks than from great teachers. The Black Muslim movement, for example, began from influential figures like Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad, but it was the networks of their disciples that allowed their teachings to become great religious movements. Immigrant Muslims generally came to United States with average knowledge of Islam. It was only after they gathered and created organizations that Islamic movements expanded and were able to hold annual nationally publicized events.

Since the emergence of Islamic authority is important to understanding the establishment of Islamic Center of East Lansing, I would like to conclude by outlining important characteristics of that authority in the context of reterritorialized Islam. First, authority is a perpetuation of service wherein different human situations are treated according to their type of complexities. Second, authority is dynamic, progressing through various stages of ups and downs. Third, authority requires that the community's interactions be held in an open public space, where its progress would have room to expand or shrink. Fourth, there is a goal for every existence of authority, namely, the intended service. Fifth, authority exists when there is acceptance—no matter how small—of the actions being rendered. Sixth, there is a name, or at least a symbol, for the service being realized. And

seventh, the declared name gains recognition from another authority existing beforehand. As such, based on the present study, authority could be defined as a dynamic perpetuation of public interactions that begins with an attempt of service that gains an acceptance, and a name that is sealed by an appropriate form of recognition. With this definition, the main characteristic of an authority is its perpetuation, and the other characteristics are the ones necessary to uphold the perpetuation itself. In other words, the emergence of an authority begins from an attempt to serve, and concludes with a recognition originating from another body of authority.

Building on this definition, it can be seen from the attitudes and actions of the mosque activists in the city that they had tried to ensure the existence of Islamic authority beyond their own existence in place and time. In other words, their efforts are a result of the so-called *objectification* of Islam. Following Eickelman and Piscatori, I understand the *objectification of Islam* as representing a way of rationalizing Islamic teachings that can be “seen as systems (*manhaj*) to be distinguished from non-religious ones.” With this understanding, the subjects or runners of an Islamic authority can work, produce and reproduce, repeat and change or manipulate parts of Islamic operations toward certain purposes. In this case, we can observe how the operators of Lansing’s Islamic authority worked on their center and the agendas of its organization to make what they perceived as Islamic services available not only during their time but also after they left the area. The agendas with which they concerned themselves included the mosque’s institutional products, such as constitutions and handbooks that presented visions, missions, and the execution of the programs and policies, all of which were supposedly aimed to serve the community better.

There is a shortcoming that I wish to address in a future study. Almost all the descriptions in this thesis have been sourced from the side of the leaders and the elders of the Islamic Society. If there is a plan for further observation, this thesis can be expanded by adding more voices from the

middle-level workers of the organization and the ordinary members of the congregation, which would include fathers, mothers, youths, and pupils. Further, additional fieldwork may be needed to collect the voices of outsiders, which would include members of local governments, the local college community, and the neighbors who live near the Center. By incorporating a considerable amount of information from the perspective of the host society, one can arrive at a deeper understanding of Islam in Lansing, and indeed, by extension, Islam in America.

In the end, neighborhood tranquility matters. Whatever the reasoning is, pragmatic considerations ultimately determine Islamic development. The new presence of a mosque and Muslim residents would impact the social economic situation of any given American neighborhood. And when one considers that in a Muslim-majority country, such as my own country of Indonesia, it is much easier to establish a mosque without having to deal with various property regulations. All of this is to say that the establishment of a mosque in East Lansing must be appreciated as a significant achievement.

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