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To

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The Muslim Planet Project

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Acknowledgments:

This issue consists of one article reproduced here from Al Jazeera.

A representative of the Muslim Planet Project visited San Cristobal de las Casas. There are actually two Muslim communities in San Cristobal de las Casas, one described in this Al Jazeera article, and the other exists in a well to do neighborhood, mostly consisting of Spanish (European) folks who converted to Islam and then migrated to Mexico and settled in San Cristobal de las Casas over quarter of a century back. The conversion of the 500 Mayans described in the article was the result of dedicated efforts by this Spanish community. However, some Saudi delegate arrived and found fault with the Spanish Muslim Community, as a result the Muslim community in San Cristobal de las Casas splintered into two groups who no longer work with one another. Soon after that the Saudis left.

There is now a magnificent mosque in San Cristobal de las Casas, perhaps the first in Mexico (apart from Musallas). This mosque is built by the continuing efforts of the Spanish Muslim Community.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in the articles are those of their authors and do not necessarily represent the Muslim Planet Project.



Announcements

1. Muslim Planet Project wishes a *Blessed New Year* to all of us.
2. Muslim Planet has started a series on [Spirituality](#).

3. You can send us announcements of countrywide interest for inclusion in this News Journal.
 4. Independence days in December Mubarak to Central African Republic, Thailand, Tanzania, Upper Volta, Kenya, and Niger.
 5. "Migration from East to West Punjab: A Personal Recollection" was presented to a group of Jewish and Muslim artists in MD. If interested, please contact us for a copy.
 6. Please [DONATE](#) to support the Muslim Planet Project.
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Inside Mexico's mud-hut mosque

About 500 indigenous Mayans, some linked to Zapatista rebels, converted to Islam and celebrate Eid by eating spicy food.

Chris Arsenault Last Modified: 30 Aug 2011 17:08



San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico

On a dirty road past tourist shops, dreadlocked backpackers and Spanish-style catholic churches and just beside an abandoned mill inhabited by indigenous squatters, sits a mosque - built from a mud hut - and nestled in a corn field.

It is about as far from Mecca as one can get, but this is where Salvador Lopez Lopez comes to pray.

An indigenous Mayan, fluent in the local Tzotzil dialect, Lopez is one about 500 Muslims in Chiapas, Mexico's southern-most state.

And, like many stories in this state plagued by poverty, Lopez's journey to Islam began with a tragedy.

"I was trained as a traditional healer," Lopez says, sitting on a bench outside the mosque. Raised on a mix of catholic and indigenous beliefs, common for people in the area, Lopez was working with a family in his community of Chamula, outside of San Cristobal when calamity struck.

"First one of the daughters died, then the mother and later one of the sons. I went to the church all the time and prayed for them. But, I said to myself, 'I'm not praying well because they are all dying.'"

Chiapas ranks fourth from the bottom of Mexico's 31 states in terms of life expectancy, according to Physicians for Global Justice, and indigenous people are disproportionately likely to face an early grave.

As death stalked the people he was tasked to care for, Lopez hit the bottle. He drank hard. Then he converted to evangelical Protestantism.

An unfamiliar path to conversion

"The people in Chiapas who changed their religion to Islam, usually first converted to become evangelicals," says Cristian Santiago, an anthropologist in San Cristobal de las Casas who studies urban indigenous communities.

American evangelical churches started sending missionaries into Chiapas in the late 1970s, Santiago says, while Muslims - mostly converts from Europe - came on the scene in the 1990s.

Even after adopting his second religion, Lopez says he still could not find peace.

"The pastors told me to stop drinking and they gave me a bible, but my heart was not with it," he says.

As Lopez searched for answers, other groups were taking action. In 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), a grassroots social movement, launched a rebellion in Chiapas, seizing six towns and demanding justice and respect for Mexico's long-neglected indigenous people.

"They want to take our land so that our feet have nothing to stand on. They want to take our history so that our word will be forgotten and die," said Subcomandante Marcos, a spokesman for the Zapatistas, speaking about Mexico's government and corporate elite. "They do not want us to be indigenous. They want us dead."

Those words, and the rebels' aims, appealed to Lopez. "Maybe those people know where god is," he thought, and set out to learn more about the Zapatistas, although during an interview he refused to talk about his relationship with the rebels, arguing that politics and religion must be kept separate.

A new faith

In 1996, the Zapatistas and Mexico's government were negotiating a peace deal, and activists from all over the world poured into Chiapas to bear witness. San Cristobal de las Casas buzzed with political activity.

At that time, Lopez was promoting a project to create an indigenous-run market in San Cristobal, so people could sell their farm products and crafts directly to consumers, without having to pay a middleman.

At a meeting, he encountered a Spanish Muslim, who offered to help out with the project.

"When the Spanish Muslims came, they opened many businesses, mostly carpentry shops, restaurants and greenhouses," says Santiago, the anthropologist. "And they started to give work to people who converted."

Lopez and one of the Spanish Muslims began spending time together, discussing matters of faith over coffee.

"He taught me how to pray and all the different prayers," says Lopez, who can recite important parts of the Quran in Arabic and has a version of the holy book that is translated into Spanish.

"I learned that there is not god, there is only Allah and his prophet is Mohammed," says Lopez, who travelled to Mecca in 2002 with help from the Spaniards.

According to reports, most Spanish Muslim missionaries in Chiapas come from the Murabitun sect, a largely European group of converts to the Sufi strain of Islam. Some Islamic groups have been highly critical of the Murabitun and their interpretations of religious scriptures.

Shaykh Abdalqadir, a Scotsman and the group's apparent spiritual leader, is said to be an anti-capitalist who believes that Muslims should return to the traditions set out by the prophet Mohammed.

The idea of returning to a past era when life was better, and critiques of rent-seeking business practises, seems to resonate in Molina, the desperately poor community where the Lopez's mosque is located, on the outskirts of San Cristobal.

Land rights in a religious context

The area is considered an illegal settlement by municipal authorities, and residents do not have title to the land.

San Cristobal, with about 100,000 residents, has a long history of illegal settlements, says Cristian Santiago, the anthropologist.

People pushed out of rural communities for various reasons including personal or political disputes, land and water scarcity, or religious strife would try to settle in the city, Santiago says.

"Religious disputes [between Christian sects] proved to be an interesting way to take land away from some people," says Santiago. "Political dissidents in some [rural] communities in northern Chiapas were accused of being Protestants by local leaders. These people would be expelled, and local leaders would take their land."

In the 1970s, servants were the only indigenous people formally allowed to live in San Cristobal, Santiago says, "and they were heavily controlled". People who migrated to the city were not allowed to work in the formal economy, driving taxis or running their own market stalls, so they worked in the informal economy.

As their numbers swelled, they became a powerful political constituency, with politicians and non-indigenous residents worrying the situation could become explosive if a compromise was not reached.

"The local people [Mestizos or mixed race] realised the indigenous wouldn't accept the discrimination of the past," says Santiago.

Some indigenous squatter communities allied themselves to local political parties, swapping votes and a power base for support from institutional powers. Sometimes these communities would gain paved roads, electricity or even formal land title, depending on shifting political winds, Santiago says.

Other communities, including Molina, tried to chart an independent course. The community is allied to the *Other Campaign*, a plan launched by the Zapatistas in 2006 to build support from social movements around Mexico.

Lopez had supported the Zapatistas in the past, but he says he is not active with them today. Now, he is busy practising his new faith and running his shop, located across the street from the mosque.

During our interview an indigenous woman wearing traditional cloths, and a knitted cloth over her hair, asks Lopez if she can pay for her goods later. He agrees and writes her a slip.

There are similarities between traditional Mayan views and Islam, Lopez says.

"Muslims eat together. They put a big plate in the centre and everyone eats with their hands. My grandparents did that," he says.

"When I came to San Cristobal I started using forks because it is supposed to be cleaner. But that [idea] is political. We now eat from the same plate, the same as our culture did before." During Eid, local Muslims gather together in the mosque to eat "really spicy food", he says.

Changing religions can be a contentious matter, but Lopez says his family and most friends have learned to accept his choice, even if they found it

strange at first. "Before I was a bit of a drunk, but I changed my life. Now I work and look after my family, nothing else."