



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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Religious Practices: Conversion: Mexico: Chiapas  
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Islam was first brought to Mexico by Muslim Spanish conquerors in the early sixteenth century. However, the Moriscos (Muslims forced to convert to Roman Catholicism) did not openly practice their religion due to the repression of Islam in Spain, instead choosing to hide their beliefs in order to survive. In the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Syro-Lebanese immigrants came to Mexico during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. The great majority of these immigrants were Christian but an estimated 10 percent were Muslim and most settled in urban centers such as Mexico City where they found an economic niche as petty traders. (Reliable statistical data on the Muslim population of Mexico is unavailable, for either the past or the present.)

It was not until the beginning of the 1990s that grassroots Muslim organizations began proselytizing in Mexico with the explicit purpose of expanding Islam. These include the Sunni organizations Centro Cultural Islámico de México (CCIM) and El Centro Salafi de México, both based in Mexico city and the Murabitun Movement, an international Sufi order with an active missionary presence in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. Another Sufi organization is the Nur Ashki Jerrahi, based in New York City, with branches in the Mexican cities of Cuernavaca, Oaxaca, and Mexico City (Garvin 2005). Finally, there is the Comunidad Islámica de la Laguna, a Shi‘i organization established in the northern state of Coahuila (Cañas 2006).

Mexico is a predominantly Roman Catholic country; however, the southern state of Chiapas is an area with one of the lowest national rates of adherence to Roman Catholicism and presents the largest number of religious options. Islam arrived in Chiapas in 1995 through the Murabitun Sufi order, originally from southern Spain (Morquecho 2004). Muslim presence in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas became publicized after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. By that time, the number of Muslims in this city had increased to 250 and was distributed in two groups: the Sufi group, founded by the Spaniards, and a second, separate group subscribing to Sunni Islam. The majority of converts are Maya indigenous people who live in the shanty towns surrounding the city.

The women discussed in this entry belong to the Sunni group. Most of them are young married women with small children. A few of them are single and some are a little older than 60. Most of these women converted to Islam following their husbands, who were the first to do so. However, there are cases in which some men became Muslim after marrying Muslim indigenous women and being pressured by their fathers-in-law. In fact, for Muslim indigenous women it is of great importance that their spouse practices the same religion as theirs. Single Muslim women consider it a fundamental requirement of a marriage partner that he be Muslim.

Sunni Muslim indigenous women play an important role in the teaching and definition of the new religion in their community. One of the reasons why they separated from the original group founded by the Murabitun was their general rejection of polygamy. Women were not willing to accept that their husbands would marry other women, arguing that even if polygamy was allowed, it was not an obligation for Muslims. In addition, women in the Sunni group have access to the mosque, as well as to reading and discussion of the Qur’ān and other holy writings. They are not allowed to conduct the prayers but, from their assigned place inside the mosque, they are able to establish dialogue with their fellow

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believers: they may speak and correct and comment upon the readings. Even though elderly women are illiterate, this has not been a burden in their learning of the new religion, especially since the younger women help them to get closer to the holy writings. Women of different generations share the reading of the texts and discuss them not only among themselves but also with the men. Their commitment to the Islamic texts has been expressed as a constant attempt to put into practice values such as kindness and mutual help. These values are extended beyond their Sunni group, including to non-Muslim women who live in the same community but who profess other religions. In this way, the adoption of Islam has contributed to the widening and reinforcement of solidarity networks among women, despite religious differences.

Women believe that their conversion to Islam is carried out gradually. For example, they think that it will not be until their faith is completely strong and until they achieve a solid knowledge of their religion that they will be able to wear the veil at all times. Meanwhile, they only wear this piece of clothing to attend the mosque and to perform their daily prayers. This way of wearing the veil contrasts with the experience of women in other parts of the Muslim world, for example the mosque movement in Egypt documented by Saba Mahmood (2001). From this we can extrapolate that the diversity of meanings that wearing the veil may hold depends on the context in which it takes place. This also allows us to question simplistic ideas according to which the veil is synonymous with submission and oppression.

The gradual incorporation of Arabic phrases into daily life is another illustration that Islam is learnt slowly. Women still speak their mother tongue, Tsotsil; nonetheless, they wish to learn more Arabic in order to be able to better read and understand the Qur'ān. In this sense, the incorporation of Arabic, the new language associated with their conversion to Islam, has not meant the abandonment of their mother tongue. The same can be said about many of their indigenous customs. For example, women still wear their traditional dress, demonstrating that one can retain local identity as well as being a Muslim.

Contrary to stereotypes, indigenous women actively participate in the generation of income to support their families as well as in the political issues of their community. For them, the new religion represents neither an obstacle nor an impediment; on the contrary, it has reinforced women's participation at various levels. Yet, the complex process of appropriating Islam does pose some limits and contradictions. This makes it impossible to assert that Islam has only generated positive changes or, conversely, that the transformations have only acted against women. Rather, these limits and contradictions are a result, among other things, of the different sociocultural positions women take as married or single, young or old, mothers, grandmothers, wives, and sisters-in-law – all of which are set within the larger social context of Chiapas State and are marked by the situation of marginality experienced by indigenous people living in the shanty towns around San Cristobal de las Casas. Yet even if this is an incipient and marginal conversion process, women and men are building an indigenous Islam, in which they successfully combine their ethnic identity with their religious belief.

This active participation of women in the appropriation of Islam questions the generalized images of this religion and, more specifically, of Muslim women. It also underscores the existence of multiple ways of being a Muslim woman and of living Islam.

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