

## **All about Muslim Identity in the Federal Prison System: Power and Domination**

Zubair Osman Yousif

### **Introduction**

From the onset, let me point out that my title is not what it seems. Reading it for the first time, you may be tempted to conclude that this essay is about everything on earth that discusses Muslim identity or covers all Muslim identity in the Federal Prisons. Far from it; this is about what Muslim identity means to the inmates in the Federal Prison system who embrace Islam for various reasons. The key issue here rests on the phrase “All about”.<sup>1</sup>

Consider this other way of putting the title to mean: What is the big deal about Muslim prisoners’ identity and power play? By the way, who cares for this group which is behind the lock and the key? Are they not supposed to be forgotten behind the lifeless concrete walls, steel, and wires? Why is their identity important enough for us to even consider writing or reading about? The answer to the last question is pretty simple; everything about prison must be viewed in a unique way, or context if you like.<sup>2</sup> Though it is a world within another world, but yet it differs from the world as we know it. There are two sets of rules or principles that operate in prison; that of the establishment and the one among all inmates; Muslim inmates included. Rules in prison are governed by identity, who and what you identify with.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This style of writing is based on John R. Bowen’s book, *Can Islam be French*.

<sup>2</sup> GhaneaBassiri, K. (2010). *A History of Islam in America* (pp2-3). Shows the diversity of American Muslims which can be likened to Prison set up.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with prison inmate AW conducted on 4/26/2017.

Identity is a fundamental aspect of human beings and has been widely discussed within various scopes to include psychological, social, anthropological, and political studies. Muslim identity, specifically, is a complicated issue because there is no consensus on what constitute a Muslim identity. Muslim identity becomes even more complicated when it is specifically applied to Muslim prisoners because of its diversity; it is not one dimensional.<sup>4</sup> This paper intends to examine the question of Muslim inmates' identity formation in the Federal Prisons as it relates to Islam as a source of empowerment and self-preservation in the inmates lived experiences. In doing this, the paper intends to arrive at a better understanding of this group of Muslims who are ultimately, an extension of the outside community.

### **The Voice of the Mu'adhin**

Inmate AW looked at me with a sly smile on his face and sparkly but penetrating hazel colored eyes. He has an aura of serenity about him despite the fact that all around him exhibit anything but serenity. I tried for a bit to focus on why he was so serene. It took me a bit to understand, but I did eventually; it was the resignation of a sage, but yet simple and almost imperceptible. "So chap (short for chaplain), do you really want to know how I became a Muslim?" AW asked. I said "yes". "It was through the voice of the *mu'adhin*", he replied.

The *mu'adhin* is the Arabic name for one who calls to any of the five daily obligatory Muslim prayers. The first time inmate AW (I will refer to him henceforth as AW) heard the *adhan*-call to prayer- was when he was playing cards in the recreation yard. You see, there is not much to do for inmates after work or for those who do not work. Most of the regimented time is either spent on playing cards, shooting pool table, playing drafts, or working out. Others engage in

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<sup>4</sup> Hamm, M. S. and Ammar, H. N. (2015). *Exploring Islam in US Prisons*. In N. H. Ammar (Ed), *Muslims in US Prisons: People, Policy, Practice* (pp. 2-3). Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner. Retrieved from [http:// www.reinner.com](http://www.reinner.com)

gambling while the more serious ones either go to the chapel and education library, or simply learn a trade.<sup>5</sup> AW was the gambling type. “You could call me a gambling addict back then”, he said. AW was born and raised 38 years ago in Atlantic City, a gambling citadel in New Jersey, to African American parents. Though his father is Muslim, he had never been formally introduced to Islam before coming to jail. Gambling and its affiliations with gang groups was all he knew. Once AW witnessed a horrific murder scene in his city when one Muslim gang killed an opposing Muslim gang member. What made this crime horrific was that before the murder, the victim requested to make *Salah* (Muslim ritual prayer) and the murderer obliged. But just when the victim prostrated, he was shot in the back of the head. Such was the brutal environment in which AW grew up.

This violent lifestyle is not unique to AW. Almost all the time, American youths, especially African Americans living in overcrowded urban cities are exposed to all sorts of violence, and other societal dysfunctions and ills. A lot of these youths either end up dead or in jail. It is in jail that some of them turn a new leaf and embrace Islam or other faith groups. Islam in prison is mainly divided into three groups; Sunni Muslims; the Nation of Islam; and the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA). AW belongs to Sunni Muslims. His journey to formal Islam began when he heard the *mu’adhin’s* call to prayer which stirred some emotions in him. He described it as a peaceful and melodious tune that went deep inside his guts. From then on, each time he heard the *adhan*, he would stop whatever he was doing to listen attentively without knowing the meaning. “Eventually, I said man, someone is trying to speak to me and I must begin with finding out the meaning of these words.” And so he did. The rest of it is history now because he became Muslim in prison where he has been incarcerated for the past 18 years.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, two former inmates were invited at the banquet for volunteers recently. One of them after 18 years of time, has become a dental assistant. The other a real estate agent. Both learned their trades in prison.

For AW and others, Muslim identity is everything. He sees his faith as a journey to discover himself as those before him like Malcolm X had done. But unlike Malcolm X, he will rather focus on himself and his family on how to be a better person. Again, in distinguishing himself from Malcolm X, he was saying that he is not fit to wipe the dust of Malcolm's shoes because such iconic figures are rare. Not only are they rare, but Malcolm came out of a different context. Malcolm's milieu was born in the era when the Blackman was trying to rediscover who or what he is vis a vis the suffering of black people as a race through slavery. For Malcolm X, his identity as a Muslim is fused with invoking "Africa as the homeland, the motherland".<sup>6</sup> Despite this claim, Grewal notes in her book that biological roots may not be the sole reason for this transnational moral geography. But rather, it is a "critique of the brutalities of American racism."<sup>7</sup> AW was quick to add that though his challenges are different today from those of Malcolm X, his encounters are the offshoots of what other African American Muslim pioneers grappled with. In other words, "no situation developed out of a vacuum", he lamented.

### **The Example of the Prophet**

It is very easy to observe the unique way in which the majority of African American Muslims on the prison compound carry themselves. You can see them with one inch folded pants above the ankle, keeping long and thick beards, wearing robes to *Jumah* Friday noon prayers, and using a *miswak* (chewing stick as a toothbrush) before each prayer.<sup>8</sup> To these Muslims, not only are they copying the lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) because they believe this is authentic Islam, but they also see the practice as a way of regimented discipline. AW, like some of these inmates, feels that this representation of Islam (Saudi-backed Salafi) is the best. Other inmates like

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<sup>6</sup> Grewal, Z. (2014). *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (p.81).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.99.

ROW, are not so convinced.<sup>9</sup> Inmate ROW is a Muslim from the Moorish Science Temple of America who insisted that there “is more to faith than outward appearances.” I asked him to explain what he meant by that and he responded that “appearance can be deceptive. How can you wear a *kufi* (a small scalp hat worn by Muslims), or prayer oil and be a blood or a crib member. What, are we serving multiple masters now or what?” But despite this reality, the Sunni Muslim literalists feel this is the only way for them to preserve Islam and show a distinct identity.

The issue of who represents Islam can be looked at from wider and global perspectives to include the jostling for power between the Saudi/Kuwaiti Sunni alliance against the Iranian Shi’ spread after the 1979 Iranian revolution. Each is fighting for the sole right to interpret and dominate Islam through financial backing and heavily subsidized literature, and scholarship to study abroad. This phenomenon did not start today, it dates back to the history of Muslims in America seeking legitimacy, self-respect and recognition. Grewal puts it this way: “African American Muslims speculate about their roots in Islamic Africa.”<sup>10</sup> Similar sentiments have been transferred to the prison system as well. The MSTA brothers for instance begin their weekly devotions with the Moroccan and American flags side by side. Inmates tell me of their desire to migrate as the prophet did. Some to Africa (the prophet’s companions first migrated to Abyssinia now Ethiopia); others say they want to go to Medina and study the “authentic” Islam. A similarity to Hamza Yusuf’s rhetoric about traveling abroad for Islamic knowledge (*rihla*).<sup>11</sup> This also echoes the current trends of young American Muslims traveling abroad for religious study.<sup>12</sup> But is the authority to speak for Islam so important? Inmate ROW does not think it is.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with inmate ROW (Moorish Science Temple of America) on 4/27/2017

<sup>10</sup> Grewal, op.cit. p.33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p167.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.35.

ROW has been in prison for the past 20 years. He said he joined the Moorish Science Temple of America because it provides him with the avenue to associate himself with the global Muslim community just as the founders of the Temple had envisioned.<sup>13</sup> He did not go into details of how he became a member of the MSTA, but gave enough to suggest that he was born as one. As the leader of the prison MSTA, ROW is often referred to as Bey, one of the common titles of the group signifying their roots. For ROW, the MSTA is all about improving the lot of the black man as the oppressed. “I came to prison as a confused, undisciplined, and rebellious youth who acted out at the slightest provocation.” He pontificated that the discipline, direction and the sense of purpose instilled in him by the MSTA has changed his life totally for the better. One thing he particularly loves about prison is the fasting month of Ramadan. When I asked, “Why?” He said “This is the month in which the three groups of Muslims come under one umbrella to fast and break the fast together.” The sense of togetherness and unity in diversity to him supersedes any claim for authority.

### **Pleasure out of Pain**

As I sat in my office interviewing and talking to inmate ROW, it started raining. Simultaneously, inmates started pouring into the compound from the recreation yard to go for lunch. You have to remember that here in prison, life is organized around the police schedule. Not your typical outside luxurious and unshackled freedom to roam around. You eat lunch when it is time to eat lunch. There is no makeup lunch, dinner or breakfast. “Do you know what I miss most?” ROW asked, and without waiting for an answer, he continued: “Food. I mean real food. My grandmother’s cooking of soul food.” Here in prison, the same food is served every Tuesday, just

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<sup>13</sup> GhaneaBassiri, op cit., p.202.

as every other day of the week. For instance, you eat fried fish every Friday and so on. But is he speaking to only himself about longing for his grandmother's cooking? This nostalgia cuts across and goes beyond the prison's barbed wire. Immigrants of all shades miss their home dishes; so do many people who find themselves out of their normal comfort zones. The monotony of knowing what exactly you will eat on Fridays in addition to missing out on the home cooking is unbearable to ROW.

I was raised by my grandmother. She loved to cook. A good home cooked soul food meal, you know. She used to tell me how we fashioned our own concoction of food using the slave master's leftovers and rejects. Yeah! Scraps, thrown away unwanted parts! The result is black-eyed peas, hot corn bread, candied yams, macaroni and cheese, ox tails and okra to celebrate and bond with other family members. It is always like a feast, a favorite family pastime, yeah. Do you know that soul food is a symbol of our unconquerable spirit as African Americans? You could even call it deriving pleasure out of our pain! This is how you survive. I will survive, despite my long sentence.

Everything in prison is the same. Khaki shirts and pants; grey sweat shirts and pants; white and grey socks; orange beanie hats in winter that make you visible from a mile away, as if you are not visible enough. Everywhere is the same. Everybody looks the same. They call it uniformity. It is similar to a school, or a hospital to some extent, where group identification is glaringly visible. One marked difference from the hospital or school is that in prison, you have no name-literally speaking- because your name does not matter. People could have the same last names, or both the first and the last names. To make it easy you are given a number. Yes, you are a number, an eight digit number.

It is ironic that some Muslims in American prisons do not like their names any way. So to some of them it does not make any difference whether they are given numbers or not. They shed their names when they convert. They pick new Muslim names which often must mean something.

For instance, the MSTA believe that name means everything.<sup>14</sup> Your name is a spiritual and religious identity which made you more spiritually and physically resilient to the harsh life and humiliation of everyday life in American ghettos.<sup>15</sup> Or if you like, prison life. For the Nation of Islam, it is very much the same way; a rejection of the humiliating and dehumanizing past to embrace a new Muslim faith as a form of personal transformation. The new names also serve as a binding force to great figures and concepts in the Muslim past providing inspiration for daily life.<sup>16</sup> I must point out here that though the Qur'an does not mandate a change of name when one converts,<sup>17</sup> however, the Prophet did change some names. For instance, *Harb* (war) was changed to *Silm* (peace).<sup>18</sup>

### **Watch Your Step**

The prison system, as an arm of the nation-state, can be said to be arguably one of the most powerful and pervasive moral geography of our modern world. But the confined moral geography is a little different from the vast almost limitless open world. Prison is about space or territory where each group marks its territory as if the demarcation by the powers that be is not enough. The key phrase is “Watch your step”. You do not want to step on anyone’s space or toes for that matter. You could land yourself in some deep waters especially if you are not a good swimmer. Being incarcerated is like traversing a landmine area; if you step in the wrong spot you could lose a limb or two, or even die. The establishment has marked specific lines in bold RED with very

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<sup>14</sup> Grewal, “Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority”, 87-88.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Muhammed or Mohammed for the Prophet himself. Other historical names are Ali, for the nephew of the Prophet who played a crucial role in the early history of Islam. Hassan and Hussain for Ali’s children and grandsons of the Prophet through his daughter. Khadijah and Zainab for wives of the Prophet, and Fatima, for one of his daughters.

<sup>17</sup> See Q33:5.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Agiman, C .Which Names did the Prophet Change? [www.lastprophet.info](http://www.lastprophet.info) (accessed 5/6/2017).



clear white writings not to go beyond. Every space is an enclosure within itself and confines of the prison. There is a gulf between the staff and the inmate population which naturally breeds mistrust, dislike, and at times hatred. This concentrated population of inmates see themselves always as the victims while the staff is seen as representing the villainous establishment. Ironically, inmates play the same blame game among themselves.

In order not to step out of line, you have to map your area. How do you do that? By belonging to a group. A kind of fraternity in blood, tears and sweat. When you become a member, not only are you protected but also defended. These groups vary from gang affiliation to race and religion. I do not intend to bore you with gang epithets or any affiliation for that matter. But you need to know and understand that, each group has some identifiers. The Muslim group goes by the affiliation of the word “brother”. Brother connects all the three Muslim groups mentioned earlier. You are protected to the very end whatever the situation. In return, you must live up to the expectation of the group. You must not be seen in the company of others outside your enclosure. In the eating area you must not sit with the *kaafir* (disbeliever) who represents “others.” If you do, you will face the consequences. Disciplinary committees are set up under the direction of the leader, who wields enormous powers. He has eyes everywhere. AW who had a gambling problem was once summoned before the committee. He summed it up this way:

Everyone was wearing boots and they were about six tough looking guys with tattoos. You don't wear boots after work for no reason. That was the end of my gambling habit. I credit brothers for this help. Though faith is about the heart, if it is not there, it is not going to be in your actions. Nonetheless, policing each other is what brotherhood means.

Watching your step in a way is a means of communication in prison. It is about sending messages to different audiences. The first audience is among the inmates themselves. Do not cross

my path. That will mean disrespect. Therefore, you need to be put in your proper place. No one wants to be “punked” in any way. Another message recipient is the authority. Almost like the proverbial cat and mouse game, each trying to outwit the other. It is more than a game though. It is serious business that can lead to someone getting hurt, badly hurt. Imagine having about twelve hundred men milling into each other at any given moment. This is a recipe for disaster because it does not take much to see blows thrown at each other or bodies flying about. Officers getting attacked and injured or even killed. On almost daily basis you could see paramedics and officers running to the scene of commotion, adrenalin pumping, to intervene and restore order. Like the blink of an eye, all is quiet as if nothing happened. When you ask what happened? It is hard to get volunteer information. Blank stares, tight lips, “I ain’t seen nothing” is the flat response to any attempt to solicit information or ascertain facts. If you volunteer information, you are a “snitch”, and you will probably end up in what is called the SHU. A euphemism for segregation unit which is totally separate from the general population. We have a lot of terminologies in the prison vocabulary.

### **Liberation through Spirituality**

Islam means a lot to African American Muslims in Prison. Not mainly because of power and authority, both of which play a major part, but because it is what keeps them functioning as human beings. Having been divorced from any freedom, the only thing left for them and guaranteed in the First Amendment to the US Constitution is the Freedom of Religion. This means that everyone in prison has the right to practice their religion subject to the safety of the institution. It is only the safety of the institution that trumps everything else. Muslim inmates and others of different faiths use religion as a protection and life-changing experience as in the case of AW and ROW. Over the years, Islam has metamorphosed in detention centers to stand for self-sustaining

community with liberationist tendencies. Themes of social justice and equality, self-reliance, propagation or *da'wa* have come to permeate prison discourse. This did not just happen out of a vacuum. It is a continuation from the contributions of predecessors like Duse Mohammed Ali, Noble Drew Ali, Wallace D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad and his children, Malcolm X, and others with majority of them starting out in prison.<sup>19</sup> For this reason and others, it appears quiet imperative for society not to entirely forget or neglect the incarcerated brothers and sisters. After all, is prison not an extension of the larger society?

Yes, it is an extension of the larger society. But wait a minute before you jump to hasty conclusions about being part of the society. What part am I talking about? The forgotten part. Do you know how many relatives will have nothing to do with convicts? Moore than you can imagine. Not many like to be associated with the stigma of having a loved one in prison. They are nothing but a bunch of misfits. They poison the society. They have stained the good family name. Therefore, they must be ostracized and forgotten. For some inmates, the disconnection is mutual. "I have nothing to do with my family" is the usual comment or lamentation. But not all families or incarcerated think like that. There are family members who still keep in touch and come to visit regularly. I know of a Jewish inmate whose 70-years old mother drove an hour every Sunday to visit her son for ten years. When the son told his mother about the chaplain delivering a lecture on honoring parents and keeping family ties, she insisted on meeting me. I did meet her in the visiting room and she said, "Thank you chaplain, please keep my son, my only son, in prayer and out of trouble."

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<sup>19</sup> GhaneaBassiri, pp.183-227.

For Muslim inmates AW and ROW, Muslim identity provides self-image, building of social relationship through communal prayer, fasting, recitation of the Qur'an and advising and guiding one another. For now, this current life represents their lived experience as Muslims regardless of the outside world, prison wires or concrete enclosures. This is their community.

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