

Maya Muslims in Chiapas: Religious Conversion as Sociocultural Empowerment?

Musulmanes mayas en Chiapas:
¿conversión religiosa como empoderamiento sociocultural?

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Abstract: This article explores evangelical Maya conversion to Islam, a phenomenon in Chiapas/Mexico since the 1990s. It shows that conversion was triggered by missionaries but soon turned into an autonomous defense strategy against religious discrimination, economic inequality and asymmetrical political power distribution under the dominance of Catholic Indigenous elites with ties to the corporate state. Through blending with their own culture, Maya converts transform local expressions of Islam (mostly mystical Sufi orders) into a cultural resource and use it to strengthen their collective identity. This assimilation of Islam is a recent example of cultural hybridization which demonstrates how in the Latin American context even far-fetched cultural resources can be operationalized as a means for sociocultural empowerment.

Keywords: conversion; Islam; Maya; Sufism; cultural hybridization; Chiapas; Mexico.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la conversión de mayas evangélicos al islam, un fenómeno que se produce en Chiapas (México) desde la década de 1990. Muestra que la conversión fue provocada por misioneros, pero pronto se convirtió en una estrategia de defensa autónoma contra discriminación religiosa, desigualdad económica y distribución asimétrica del poder político bajo el dominio de las élites indígenas católicas vinculadas al Estado corporativo. Fusionando con su propia cultura, los mayas conversos transforman las expresiones locales del islam (en su mayoría órdenes sufíes) en un recurso cultural y lo utilizan para reforzar su identidad colectiva. Esta asimilación del islam es un ejemplo reciente de hibridación cultural que demuestra cómo en el contexto latinoamericano incluso los recursos culturales más alejados pueden funcionar como medio de empoderamiento sociocultural.

Palabras clave: conversión; islam; maya; sufismo; hibridación cultural; Chiapas; México.

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Introduction

Conversion has been theorized in many ways: as a risky alienation from the faith of the ancestors or on the contrary as a way towards religious regeneration, a symbolic death and rebirth (Yates 2000). Sometimes conversion can also be instrumental, a tool for socio-cultural empowerment. As such it has been used by Maya converts to Islam in the very specific sociocultural context of Chiapas, which is not only the poorest region of Mexico, but also the region with the least Catholics (only little over half of the population) and the highest religious diversification (Cañas Cuevas 2015; INEGI 2020). This empowerment through conversion happened in such effective ways that a specialized scholar (Winter 2000, 100) feels reminded of “a kind of liberation theology.” This is a strong statement within the Latin American context, but maybe becomes plausible if one remembers that the conceptualization of Islam as a new and different liberation theology has been introduced long ago into the critical debate about the impact of Western Hegemony and Globalization on the subaltern populations both in the West and beyond (Dabashi 2008). But why do some Indigenous people in Chiapas choose among many options precisely a Muslim religious identity? Among the known and usually referred reasons are for example that joining the Muslim community offers an accessible language of protest against social marginalization, and that Islam teaches a simple monotheism which appeals to many who feel confused by Christological and trinitarian controversies. Furthermore, the community often grows as initial Mayan converts inspire their family members and close relatives to embrace the faith as well. Additionally, it is often mentioned that the appeal of Islam in Chiapas is enhanced by the social programs (including educational scholarship) and businesses established by missionaries to community, which not only provide economic benefits but also help in forming robust community networks. This outreach helps the converts tap into the advantages of establishing a marker of Global Islam community members. These answers certainly describe the phenomenon, but do not give satisfying answers why and how this conversion happens.

In this article, we will explore more profoundly the phenomenon of Mexican Maya converting from Christianity to Islam which in Chiapas has been ongoing for almost three decades. In our study we will try to show how a historically marginalized ethnic group develops – within a context of perpetuated coloniality – strategies to strengthen both collective identity and socioeconomic conditions through conversion. We do this by answering what motivates Maya conversion to Islam, how the conversion process happens and what are the perceived signs of empowerment. To understand the attraction and ease of conversion, special attention will be given to the predominant variations of Sufism among the Muslim communities which can be roughly understood as mystical practices to experience the presence of divine love and wisdom. This analysis allows new insights into Mexican and more broadly Latin America societies and cultures and their well-known capacity to include and transform through syncretization processes ‘other’ cultural expressions even when so remote as from the Muslim world.



Figure 1. Localization of Chiapas in the southeastern region of Mexico (map: Nik Hasif and Georg Wink).

While there is a growing literature on the connections between Latin America and other non-Western world regions, the cultural and political dynamics of ‘Latin-American Islam’ have only sporadically been explored (see for example the overview by Pinto 2022). One of the leading scholars on this topic has even asserted that “despite having been a continuous part of the narrative of the Americas for the past 500 years, [Muslims’] story is rarely represented in discussions of the American hemisphere’s history or contemporary dynamics” (Chitwood 2021, 3). The state of the art on Maya conversion in Chiapas consists of a few mainly ethnographic studies from Mexican scholars. These suggest that Indigenous communities are receptive to Islamic cosmovision and able to attain a harmonic combination of their own ethnic values and adopted Islamic values (Primero González 2021). This intrinsic openness is the motif of a powerful narrative. It was probably coined by the first Muslim missionaries who arrived in Chiapas during the Zapatista rebellion period, when they praised the *fiṭra*, the natural disposition or innate primordial nature of human beings, and *ihsan*, the striving for excellence and righteousness, in all aspects of life of Maya people (Vite Pérez 2005, 6). In this sense, previous works have examined Maya conversions mainly as a private religious affair (Pastor 2009; Cañas Cuevas 2006; 2015; García Linares 2019a; 2019b; Garvin 2005;

González Calderón, Cortés, and Quintana Noriega 2021; Klahr 2002; Medina 2019; Medina and Romero Gallardo 2018; Morquecho 2004; Schenerock 2004). This means that among the three main dimensions of conversion (following the widely accepted conversion theory of Rambo 1993) research has so far concentrated on the first two: The psychological aspects of transformation in thoughts, beliefs and actions, as well as the theological aspect of the encounter with the sacred as goal of conversion.

In our approach, we focus on the third dimension of the ideological and cultural, which Rambo defines as ‘tradition’: the historical and contextual conditions of convert and target group, their previous life, the institutional aspect of religiosity, symbols, rituals, and social practices. “In Chiapas’ central mountain highlands, these Muslims have blended their faith and practice with their Mexican setting, Tzotzil Indigenous culture, and visions of an alternative world of justice, truth, and equality,” remarks Chitwood (2021, 181). This phenomenon can also be examined through Richardson’s (1980) concept of ‘conversion careers,’ where individuals explore a series of alternative beliefs and identities in a sequential process to address personal or social challenges. Drawing on these two theories, we aim to explore how the processes of blending and conversion unfold. Moreover, how is the new Muslim identity really activated as resource of self-empowerment of the Maya? To address these questions, we will examine available primary sources, such as programmatic texts of missionaries and conduct our analysis through a systematic literature review of the above-mentioned studies. By reconstructing the multiple stages and modalities of the conversion phenomenon, we aim to show that the syncretic appropriation of Islam enables a sense of empowerment among the Maya, facilitated by the Mexican context of cultural hybridity.

Latin America has been for centuries a social laboratory of reinventing collective identities, of crossing ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries, and funneling them into powerful narratives and social movements. As the Brazilian cultural philosopher Silviano Santiago argues in his seminal essay “The Latin American In-Between Space,” one of the major contribution of Latin America to Western culture lies in the destruction of the concepts of “unity” and “purity” (Santiago 1978, 18). Cultural hybridization dynamics and religious syncretism have been powerful tools for symbolic resistance and cultural resilience among socially vulnerable populations all over the continent (García Canclini, 1989). Therefore, our hypothesis is that the Muslim Maya conversion phenomenon expresses the cultural substrate of hybridization which necessarily transforms both the Maya people and Islam as religion. The religious practices of Maya people reveal that they resonate and appropriate elements of Islam, mixing them with their Indigenous and Christian – both Catholic and Evangelic – legacy. The Muslim communities which the converts create are not fully recognized as part of Islam and should rather be seen as contextually ‘embedded’ Latin-American Islam (Shamsul 2005). Hereby, Maya Muslim conversion would reaffirm core characteristic of ‘Latin Americanness’ as a specific

religious expression of cultural hybridization which has so far not been considered as part of the otherwise well-researched Latin American phenomena of religious syncretism.

How Islam came to Chiapas

Worldwide conversion rates to Islam are increasing since the end of the 20th century (Chitwood 2021), even though there are no reliable statistics to disclose the extent and nature of the missionary reach of modern Islam. In Latin America, conversion to Islam emerged several decades after the initial waves of Muslim migration, with local converts now forming a significant part of the growing Muslim population. More concrete evidence of Islam first emerged through the Arab diaspora, primarily consisting of Lebanese Maronite Christians, during the decline and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Within these early migration waves, Muslims arrived as a minority group, often remaining hidden within the broader population (Alfaro-Velcamp 2007; Taboada 2009). Today, the Muslim communities in countries like Argentina (estimated 700 000 members), Brazil (possibly up to 500 000), and Venezuela (approximately 90 000) continue to expand. High relative numbers can be found in smaller countries like Suriname (ca. 16 % of Muslim population, originally from India and Java), Guyana (ca. 7 %, mainly migrants from India), and Trinidad and Tobago (6 %, also from India) (Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle 2022, 170; Montenegro 2021, 221-223; Pinto 2022, 184). Mexico is not exceptional in having a long history of Muslim presence (Hasif 2022; 2023; 2026; Zeraoui 1997). As of 2020, the country has officially around 8000 Muslims out of a population of 126 million, though higher numbers have been reported too (Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle 2022, 170). However, this data does not specify how many of these Muslims are converts, nor does it provide insights into how many of the converts belong to Indigenous minorities. The phenomenon of conversion is not unique to Mexico, as academic research also reports similar conversion among the people of the Mapuche in Chile, Colombian Wayuu, and the Kalinago in Dominica (Chitwood 2021, 181).

The main movement to promote the spread of Islam in Latin America, and especially contemporary Mexico, through conversion has been Sufism. Sufi movements are, in general, underestimated as main drivers of proselytism, although they have triggered three major waves of conversions: first in the early 20th century, during the New Age wave of the 60s, and more recently in the 1990s through sect-alike enterprises such as the network established by the Shah brothers and the perennialist Frithjof Schuon, inspired by the traditionalist René Guénon (Hermansen 2000; Sedgwick 2016; 2018; 2021; 2022). In contemporary times, their proselytizing missions often target regions where societal structures are disrupted, particularly focusing on marginalized and conflict-affected communities. One reason for this underestimation is that these Sufi orders or *ṭarīqah* were often led by Western converts with a specific and controversial interpretation of Islam, and that not all Muslims accept them as fully belonging to Islam.

What makes the Mexican case special is the country's closeness to the United States. First, the strong migration dynamics between the countries also include Muslims from the U.S., especially through *da'wah*, proselyting missionary activities. Second, resistance against the neighbor's influence was indirectly the reason behind the first Maya conversions in Chiapas. Latin America's arguably strongest contemporary revolutionary movement, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), declared in 1994 the armed defense of Indigenous economic, political, and cultural rights against the recently established North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (García Agustín 2013). It was this struggle which attracted the Murabitun World Movement, a Sufi community founded around 1976 in Norwich, UK by Sheikh Abdalqadir as-Sufi (1930-2021).¹ Their name refers to the 11th-century Islamic revolution, one of the few genuine mass movements in Islamic history, which can be understood as a revival to reestablish a Caliphate in Europe, starting with the reconquest of al-Andalus.² In as-Sufi's books – especially *Jihad: A Groundplan* (1978) and *The Sign of the Sword* (1984) – he blends leftist anti-capitalism, rightist-traditionalist anti-modernism, and Islamic social and spiritual utopianism. Recurrent motifs are the resistance against “modernist Western degeneration,” the “world conspiracy of capital,” and “liberty, fraternity, and equality, and the Masonic ethos of Jew-controlled Christian society” (as-Sufi 1984, 13). This innovative blending of ideologies and beliefs has surprising outcomes, such as the proposal to “end the basically neurotic bourgeois family group on which totalitarian modern statism is based” by allowing for “multiple wives” as the “necessary condition” of this version of sexual revolution (as-Sufi 1978, 18).

The plans laid out in these books gained form when the Sheikh received funding to establish a center in Granada, Spain (Klahr 2002, 85), and from there began to send missionaries to regions with intense social conflict and supposed revolutionary potential (Garvin 2005, 18). In 1995, Muhammad Nafia (born in Spain as Aureliano Pérez Yruela) arrived in Chiapas offering solidarity, and supposedly money and weapons, to the Zapatist leader Subcomandante Marcos, expecting to attract him to Islam. In his letter to Marcos, Nafia responds to the famous Zapatist call to the Mexican people for a ‘grand consultation’ on a number of essential claims (Morquecho 2012).³ Nafia affirms them but also recommends the radicalization of the EZLN's political strategy by questioning the legitimacy of the state as an addressee. For Murabitun, this was a

- 1 Sheikh Abdalqadir as-Sufi, akin the Scottish actor Ian Dallas, was initiated in 1967 by the Moroccan Sufi Sheikh Muhammad ibn al-Habib al-Darqāwī in the Darqāwīyya-Habibiyya order from the late 18th century.
- 2 See Abdalqadir as-Sufi's articles and public discourses available at <https://shaykhabdalqadir.com> (01.06.2026).
- 3 The claims are land, housing, work, food, health, education, culture, information, independence, democracy, liberty, justice, peace. Available at <https://www.alainet.org/es/active/57580> (10.03.2024).

taboo, as the state – under whatever government – was always subject to ‘world capital’ and limited to ‘parasitizing the people’ through fiscal policies, oppressive rule of law, coercive circulation of paper money, and repression through its monopoly of power.⁴

Marcos never answered the letter, and it is unclear if it ever reached him, though photographs of Nafia posing together with high-rank EZLN officials do exist. The content of the letter, which proposes a solution to factual problems outside the system of liberal democracy, matches at first glance the EZLN’s own critical position. The Zapatistas would probably have agreed with the Sheikh’s conclusion in *The Sign of the Sword* that the “interactive networked system of banks and mega-banks (IMF, World Bank etc.), stock exchanges, and all forms of trading conducted under their protocols, are nothing other than the true face of usurious power control which openly governs the world” (as-Sufi 1984, 19). However, they would have opposed – and maybe for this reason they were uninterested in the proposed alliance – Murabitun’s solution outside the modern state *and* the Rousseauian social contract, which approaches a form of traditionalist anti-modernism. The conversion of the Zapatista movement failed from the beginning.

The Maya’s conversion career

Instead, the Murabitun succeeded in Mexico with a more accessible and still politically mobilized group which was not linked to the EZLN: the evangelical Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya. Most of them were impoverished and landless peasants expelled from Altos de Chiapas, the mountainous and poor regions around San Cristóbal, and especially from San Juan Chamula, who were living at the outskirts of the region’s biggest city San Cristóbal de las Casas (see Figure 2). Nafia’s small Muslim congregation quickly managed to convert a part of them to Islam, and he turned himself into their *‘amīr* (as the Murabitun term their local leaders or commanders). Why was Murabitun’s offer so welcomed? The available ethnographic material suggests that the main reason seems to have been that conversion to Islam provided some kind of protection against the violent consequences these ‘internally displaced persons’ (IDP) had been suffering since they converted from syncretic Catholicism (blended with Indigenous religions) to Pentecostal evangelicalism. Evangelical churches were established in Chiapas already by the 1970s; they included 16 % of the population at the time of the Murabitun’s arrival (Bowen 1996, 47). Among the first converts were two influential personalities, the healer Salvador López and his brother-in-law Miguel Gomez, who were the first evangelical pastors of their community (Bowen 1996, 199-201).

This formation of an evangelical religious minority provoked a decades-long and still ongoing process of religious intolerance, which eventually culminated in the above-mentioned violent expulsions of evangelical Maya from their villages in the 1990s

4 Cited by Morquecho (2012).



Figure 2. The placement of San Cristobal de las Casas on the map of Chiapas (map: Nik Hasif and Georg Wink).

(Gutiérrez-Martínez 2021). Mass expulsions in 1973-1976 (around 2000 evangelical Tzotzil) and again in the early 1990s turned the region into a focus of displaced persons in Mexico. In spite of denouncements, the federal authorities did not take any action (Olivera 2019, 236). At the arrival of the Murabitun in 1994, around 15 000 internally displaced persons were settling in colonies around San Cristóbal, sometimes on invaded public land, sometimes on collectively bought land with loans from evangelical churches. Shortly before, new violent fighting with dozens of fatalities had recently occurred between displaced evangelicals and Chamulan caciques (Bowen 1996, 211; Esponda and Pólito 1996, 21).

Was this conflict only fueled by religious causes? Other sources suggest that political and economic interests were relevant too. Local Indigenous elites, allied with Mexico's dominant Party of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and in charge of the Direcciones de Asuntos Indígenas (the municipal agencies responsible for the integration of public policies and the Indigenous population) and the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI, the federal body for implementing culturally sensitive policies regarding the Indigenous people) occupied an almost hegemonic power position in these Indigenous

communities. This allowed the dominant caciques to control not only subsidies and government benefits, but also the granting of business licenses, among them the lucrative commerce of alcohol (Robledo Hernández 2012; Morquecho 1992). This was often associated with the traditional syncretic calendar of events, “an elaborate cycle of religious festivals, built on a complex cosmology that was as Mayan as it was Catholic” (Bowen 1996, 200).

The religious minority of evangelical Maya renounced from these communitarian bargaining practices and sought support from the oppositional National Action Party (PAN) with neoliberal tendencies. Within the complex of traditions, land scarcity, and intertwined cargo distribution, this made them the target of social differentiation (‘othering’) and violent persecution. In 1981, Miguel Gomez, one of the above mentioned first evangelical pastors, was killed by Chamulan traditionalists when returning to his hometown.

When under these circumstances Nafia and his Murabitun approached the surviving Indigenous leader Salvador López, he had no difficulty in converting him to Mohamed Amín (Cañas Cuevas 2006, 103). Many members of his displaced evangelical community followed. According to Rambo’s conversion theory, the multi-faceted process of conversion includes several stages. Certainly, the three initial ones after the context, the push-factor of an acute “crisis” which makes the individual consider and “quest” new forms of religious organization, and the pull-factor of “encountering” a new charismatic leader, contributed to start the process (González Calderón, Cortés, and Quintana Noriega 2021, 35). From the ethnographic material, we can perceive that the Murabitun’s strict standards on alcohol consumption, which reinforced the already rigid Pentecostal norms, were used as a protective shield against the central function of alcohol in traditional Indigenous Catholicism and in the socioeconomic power structure of the Maya communities (Cañas Cuevas 2015). Likewise, the prohibition of marriage with the larger Christian society, the control of interaction with the ‘unfaithful’ and the duty to join the Murabitun’s collective workforce, contributed to a certain economic recovery of the community (González Calderón, Cortés, and Quintana Noriega 2021, 165). In other words, the religious question was from the beginning connected to – if not largely determined by – socioeconomic factors. The evangelical minorities reacted to expulsion and continued persecution with social organization under a new ‘external’ religious identity. As a case in point, another early pastor and Indigenous leader, Domingo López Ángel, founded in 1983 not only his own church (Bowen 1996, 171) but also the Consejo de Representantes Indígenas de los Altos de Chiapas (CRIACH), a political organization to represent the interests of the Indigenous people from the Chiapas Highlands (Uribe Cortez 2015, 124). In 1997, he entered Islam and acquired the name Omar (Klahr 2002, 87).

What seems clear is that the exclusion of an Indigenous subaltern group from public policies and institutional structures controlled by a dominant Indigenous group makes it urgent for the former to create a parallel group structure and identity. It seems also plausible that among the most effective factors driving the empowerment of a new group identity is the foundation of their own exclusive religion (i.e., differentiation). One could argue that the main function of religion has always been to create unity and solidarity for specific groups as an part of the process of identity construction and as a resource for social activism (Uribe Cortez 2015; Vite Pérez 2005, 5). This also seems to play out in the distinctive ethnic-religious identification; to be both Maya and Muslim is to have an additional cultural resource to express opposition and to restructure the community. The question about what is specific regarding Islam as religious identity *and* a form of social organization is therefore central to understanding the phenomenon of Maya conversion.

In this sense, the Murabitun's revolutionary message resonated with the principle of *buen vivir* (translated provisionally as good living, living well or wellbeing) which originates from Indigenous cultures. Abdalqadir as-Sufi's teaching that "social and political matters are part of a cosmology and not part of sociology" (as-Sufi 1978, 12) and the invitation for an "inward expansion, which means life satisfaction, fulfillment, joy of living – the very things missing in the *kāfir* society [a community where the majority or entire population rejects or does not follow the core beliefs and practices of Islam]" (as-Sufi 1978, 18) are almost paraphrases of the concept of *buen vivir* as commonly defined (see for example Huanacuni Mamani 2010, 32) and as specifically understood as *lekil kuxlejal* by Tzotzil communities in Altos de Chiapas (Paoli 2003; Santana 2015; Schlittler Álvarez 2012). The understanding of Islam as "a green plant" and the religion's "biological" model because its "tenacity and power lie in its clinging to the earth, i.e., '*ubūdiyyah*'" (as-Sufi 1978, 17) certainly spoke to communities who share the same emphasis on environmental stewardship, social justice, community solidarity, and holistic well-being. Both *buen vivir* and Islam recognize the significance placed on communal bonds and solidarity.

Sufism as conversion facilitator

Still, theological reasons might have facilitated the Maya's conversion careers as well. For example, Domingo López Ángel (see Figure 3) explains his career as a coherent evolution from Maya polytheism via trinitarian Christianity to Islamic monotheism. This perception of Islam confirms what Winter (2000, 100) underlines as the religion's most attractive characteristic in comparison to Christianity: to be taught as practical and contemplative theism, at least in Mexico and to the Maya. The few surveys which are available suggest that Islamic conversion in the West is motivated by unhappiness with liberal theology, vernacular liturgy, doubts over the doctrine of Trinity, and disillusionment with the concept of original sin (Anway 1995), in addition to the rejection of

alcoholism. The fact that the Presbyterians and the Seventh-Day Adventists, the most present evangelical churches in Chiapas and where most of the Muslim converts came from, have always had an emphatic relationship with Islam could also be a factor. Presbyterians teach, for example, that converts to Christ in Muslim-dominated cultures should maintain many of their practices of Islam as ‘completed Muslims,’ which could imply that the opposite for converts to Islam should also be possible as ‘completed Christians’ (Muether 2018). Adventists proudly point to communalities between them and Islam such as: “We believe in God and in the last days. We abstain from that which is impure, such as alcohol and pork, and we believe our lives should be lived in submission to God and His will.” In the Chiapas context, the Maya’s experience of Evangelism contributed to creating more perceived cultural familiarity with Muslims than with majoritarian Catholics (Dybdahl and Phillips 2022).

But what is meant by the Indigenous people when they feel familiar with ‘Islam’?

The main motivations for conversion to Sufism, as mentioned in the specialized literature, are closely related to individual self-realization and the commodification of culture. These can be expressed as an interest in Arab civilizational history, cultural exotism often fueled by tourism, and the mystical search for spirituality (Montenegro 2021, 228). If not these motivations, which are predominant in the case of al-Jerrahi, instrumental reasons such as adhesion to the rules for marrying a (converted) Muslim often apply. But Sufism might also be a convenient access to a new Muslim religious identity for other than these reasons. Pinto (2015) shows in his research on suburban shantytown communities in Brazil that ‘ideological conversion’ to Sufism is a third motivation, meaning that individuals see Islam as a religious system with an orientation towards social and racial justice, Third Worldism, and anti-imperialism. Not surprisingly, in the U.S. black converts to Islam outnumber whites by a factor of 20:1 (Winter 2000, 100). As shown above, politically motivated collective conversions seem to account for Maya conversions in Chiapas as well.



Figure 3. Domingo López Ángel (68 years old), also known as Omar, featured in a recent interview on YouTube.⁵

5 Interview with the leader of the Muslim community Domingo López Ángel, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMjCmZKIU-U> (01.06.2026).



Figura 4. Sheikh Amina Teslima al-Jerrahi (center) delivering a speech at the ceremony hosted by Shi'i communities in Mexico City in 2021 (photo: Nik Hasif and Georg Wink).

This Sufi dominance in Mexico, in spite of the recent missionary competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Montenegro 2021, 219), did not start in Chiapas but in the capital. The Turkish Sufi order Nur Ashki al-Jerrahi was the first to arrive in Mexico City in 1987 (Pastor 2011). Their *tekke* (a Turkish term denoting a communal space for gatherings and spiritual practices of the Sufi brotherhood) in Mexico City's upper-class neighborhood Roma is a multi-story building with a prayer area, a kitchen, a *dhikr* area (mystical Sufi dance), restrooms and a small shop. Thousands of members follow this order, most of them local converts who actively take part in the weekly activities. First lead by a male Sheikh, leadership was transferred to female Sheikh Amina Teslima al-Jerrahi (see Figure 4), born in Puerto Rico as Edelín Ortiz Graham and working as a journalist in New York before embracing Islam

(Romero Gallardo 2019, 1516). Female leadership is not unknown elsewhere in Sufism, though very unusual. In Mexico, it indicates a flexibility about gender roles which even allows for joint prayer, usually a rigidly separated ritual. This flexibility of Sufism is the key to Maya appropriation.

The syncretic appropriation of Islam

Following Winter (2000, 95-96), the Islamic scriptural and theological sources invite for transformative appropriations. "Conversion" is not a sudden rupture or a "denial" of what one already is, but a "dynamic state of experiencing and striving to merit a lifelong process of conversion to God," reason why many new Muslims today refer to themselves as 'reverts' or – as the usual idiom in Spanish goes – 'recognizers' in the sense of *reconocerse musulmán*. This inclusive culture has not been practiced by the Murabitun movement. Only a few years after converting, most Maya abandoned their first Muslim community, not to break with Islam but to establish their own religious group. The alleged issues are all related to the lack of flexibility of the Spanish leaders to include their own traditions, such as the use of Tzotzil language, traditional clothing, and food. Religious issues arose regarding the expected detachment of the community's children from formal government education (Ismu 2010), segregation from non-Muslims (including relatives and families), as well as veiling and polygamy (Ruíz Ortiz 2003). As

most of these limitations affect women and their traditional domain, it is not surprising that Schenerock (2004) and Cañas Cuevas (2015), two of the anthropologists who have spent prolonged periods of time with the communities, see Indigenous Muslim women occupying a key role in transforming Islam in Chiapas by selectively appropriating and transforming religious doctrine.

Between 2000 and 2007, Muslims in Chiapas diversified into several branches and not only associated with Sufism (in whatever sense and at least by name). Part of the families discovered mainstream Sunni Islam, the largest denomination which is majoritarian in most of the Muslim world except for the Shia dominated Iran, Bahrain, Iraq and Azerbaijan, by coming into contact with the distant Centro Cultural Islámico de México (CCIM) in Mexico City (Cañas Cuevas 2006). This contact gave rise to two Sunni groups, the first one led by Mohammed Amin (the above-mentioned healer Salvador López, one of the first converts, and community leader of the colony La Hormiga), and the second led by Yahya Checheb of the influential Checheb clan in the colony Molina de los Arcos. A third group is led by a dissident from the Checheb family, Ibrahim, and follows the Ahmadiyya movement, a strongly missionizing Muslim branch excluded from Islam due to messianism, which has been brought to Mexico from neighboring Guatemala around 2014 (see Hasif 2022; 2026; Khan 2015; Moten 2018). Other groups present in Chiapas are the Shadhili-Darqawi, Jerrahi, Naqshbandi and Suleymanci, except for the last with a self-declared Sufi orientation.

The original Murabitun movement reacted to these splits with reinforced migration of families from Spain, and with the building of the Mosque Imam Malik (see Figures 5 and 6), a representative building concluded in 2018 which today is the biggest mosque in Mexico. The dissident groups also built places to congregate in their respective neighborhoods: the al-Kausar mosque (Sunni community-run by Yahya Checheb), the Ahmadiyya Islamic Center, the Omar mosque (run by a Sufi sheikh from the Middle East), and a *madrasah* (an Islamic religious school) of the Turkish Sulemanci brotherhood (Brodard 2023; González Calderón, Cortés, and Quintana Noriega 2021, 97; Medina y Romero Gallardo 2018, 76).

Visibly, the northern suburbs of San Cristóbal have turned into a “microcosmic representation of the diversity, energy, missionary zeal, and tensions that make up the global *ummāh* (community or nation) today” (Chitwood 2021, 190). These communities are a place of a complex negotiation, between the right to adopt foreign customs as a distinction (and against Indigenous traditionalism) and the right to preserve their own heritage (against Murabitun and Spanish ethnocentrism), creating agency within a power structure determined by socioeconomic factors. What appears to be paradoxical can indeed be a discourse strategy of distinction, as argued by Pastor (2015, 144): “Conversion allows new Muslims in Mexico to step outside of local ideologies of dominance and difference. It offers the opportunity to sidestep, to circumnavigate discourses that define them as subaltern, by establishing direct access to far-away regions and the privileges of foreignness and

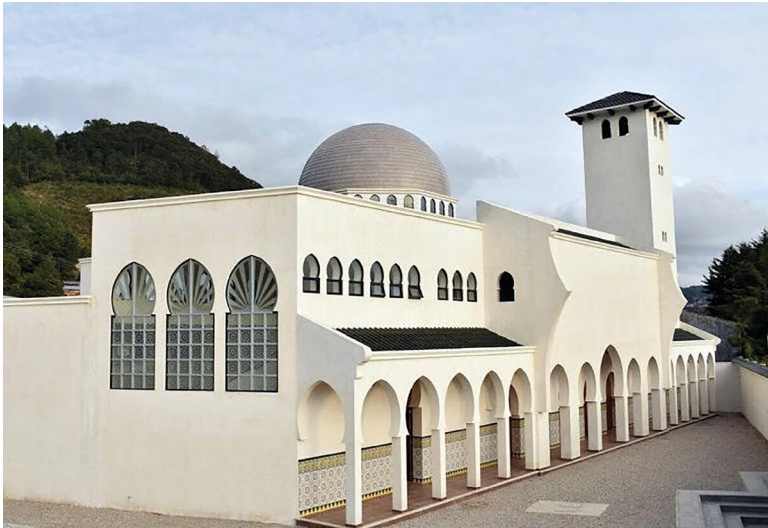


Figure 5. Mosque Imam Malik (Mesquita Imam Malik) built by Spanish Murabitun imitating Granada's Mosque (Photo: Aaron Mourtada, 2019).

cosmopolitanism through faith.” But in addition, it might be the key to understanding how marginalized Indigenous people deal with a modernity which did not only fail to generate the promised social development (Vite Pérez 2005, 6), but at the same time revealed itself through majoritarian Catholicism as purely exoteric, ritualistic, and void of spirituality. Self-affirmation and re-enchantment were sought first in Evangelicalism and then in Islam, in a dynamic and ongoing process. The outcome of this creative conversion might not have much to do with Sufi orientation, and much less with conventional Islam. This is what Domingo López Ángel suggests in a recent video where he presents his so-called *Iglesia Musulmana* (Muslim Church) – apparently a new Indigenous-Christian-Islamic fusion.⁶ Although the presence of Islam in the region originated from the expansion of Sufism, in contemporary times the Indigenous Muslims in Chiapas do not necessarily align themselves exclusively with any specific Sufi order. Instead, they exhibit a preference for mainstream denominations within Islam, such as Sunni, including Salafi, Shia and Ahmadi movement, among others.

The syncretic incorporation of Sufi-inspired practices and spirituality into Indigenous cultural practices sometimes gives rise to a new and unique blend of spirituality. Not located within Chiapas, but an outstanding example for this tendency is the fusion

6 The video dates from 22 September 2022 and is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMjCmZKIU-U> (01.06.2026). See also López (2022).

of Sufism and Guadalupanism, the veneration of the Patroness of Mexico the Virgin of Guadalupe and yearly pilgrimages to the famous Basilica in Mexico City, the country's most visible and massively attended expression of popular religion. This started with an approximation between the already mentioned New York based Nur Ashki al-Jerrahi Sufi Order and a group of Mexican *concheros*, ritual dancers dedicated to rediscover pre-Hispanic religious traditions. In their blending, they claim both the Christian-Muslim origins of Our Lady of Guadalupe and her relation to the Indigenous deity Tonantzin (Cirianni-Salazar 2021). Very prominently in this case, the Islamic dimension works as a facilitator for the reappropriation of Indigenous religiosity. Due to this level of syncretism, these practices would likely draw heavy criticism from the broader Islamic community. Nevertheless, this engagement underscores the intricate and dynamic interplay among various interpretations of Islam within the country, often inspired and even originating in the US, enriching also the diverse fabric of Muslim identity. This is particularly significant within the context of a non-Muslim majority environment where no single Islamic denomination holds official recognition as dominant, legitimate, or possessing the definitive interpretation of the religion.



Figure 6. Moorish architecture through intricate tilework and ornate decoration (photo: Aaron Mourtada, 2019).

Conclusion

Maya conversion to Islam has its origin in a much larger socioeconomic question about the distribution of economic privilege and the bargaining of political power within Indigenous communities. The emancipation from these structures, which are dominated by an Indigenous elite with ties to the corporate state and a traditional-syncretistic Catholicism, has been sought through conversion as cultural resource. In the first phase, evangelical churches offered this 'alternative collective identity,' which led to violent persecution of the dissidents. This conflict is still ongoing. In 2020 an evangelical church

was burned in El Romerillo, Chamula, and in 2021 the evangelical pastor Alejandro Jiménez was expelled from his hometown Mitzitón, had his temple burned, and was imprisoned by the fundamentalist Catholic Fiscalía de Justicia Indígena (Morales 2022).⁷ These events highlight how alternative religious identities have long been met with hostility, with tension continuing as marginalized groups use religion as a means of resistance and identity reconstruction.

Following the initial phase of evangelical conversion, the arrival of Muslim missionaries of the Murabitun movement introduced the Maya communities to an almost unknown and ‘exotic’ religion. Islam offered a new pathway for identity and a sense of becoming ‘untouchable.’ With limited possibilities to make the rules and practices of their new religion compatible with their own realities and expectations, most Muslim Maya abandoned the Murabitun. Still, they maintained the identification with ‘Islam,’ but in an adapted version to their own culture, belief systems and above all spirituality. ‘Islam’ was brought to the Maya communities through self-declared Sufi orders with their own sometimes unorthodox rules, which facilitated the adaption process. In the end, this led to a local unique synthesis of refashioned local cultural imaginaries and emulated Islamic religious practices, creating a flexible Mexican way of being Muslim.

The arrival of Islam in Chiapas, its subsequent influence on the local Indigenous population, and their transforming power on the religion itself is an intriguing case. It shows how local contextual factors can contribute to a religious mingling process which can even end up in an Indigenous Islamic-Christian fusion like the ‘Muslim Church.’ Among these factors are the history of colonial marginalization and political conflicts, the diverse and complex socio-cultural landscape, religious pluralism, and the presence of strong Indigenous social movements. The case also illustrates the region’s – and Latin America’s – known capacity for cultural hybridization over the centuries, cannibalizing ideas, and practices. Marginalized Maya Muslim converts in Chiapas showed again this capacity to adopt, assimilate, and transform a powerful religious faith and to use it as a cultural resource for their own empowerment.

7 See also the “Reporte San Cristóbal,” 18 July 2021, facebook post, [https://www.facebook.com/ReporteSanCristobal/posts/pfbid0v8QFgV1U3Lu3YN5kQHBMpKv7EBVLrHD1DdDUUpF37pjEwv4vQZDwaxLJtCJew1f7Ul?__tn__=%2CO*F\(01.06.2026\).](https://www.facebook.com/ReporteSanCristobal/posts/pfbid0v8QFgV1U3Lu3YN5kQHBMpKv7EBVLrHD1DdDUUpF37pjEwv4vQZDwaxLJtCJew1f7Ul?__tn__=%2CO*F(01.06.2026).)

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