

Islam finds a place in Haiti



Tucked away on a corner of the Haitian capital's dusty, congested Delmas Road, a modest white building bears a curious sign, painstakingly stenciled in green Western and Arabic script: "Mosque Al-Fatiha," it reads. "Communaute Musulmane d'Haiti."

An attendant splashing water on the ground greets a visitor who approaches the gate. "As-salaam aleikum (peace be upon you)," he says, breaking into a smile.

"Welcome to the mosque."

Haiti, the Caribbean nation closely associated with the African-derived faith of voodoo, is home to a small but growing community of Muslims. Two Islamic centers in the capital of Port-au-Prince are among nearly a dozen around the country started by those who have converted to the faith.

Officials with the major Islamic groups estimate there are between 4,000 and 5,000 Muslims in Haiti, a nation of about 8 million people.

In the lanes of the historic Carrefour-Feuilles quarter, a neighborhood that snakes up the mountains surrounding Port-au-Prince, a plangent, timeless sound echoes.

Among the market women haggling over prices while portable radios blare popular Haitian “compas” music, the muezzin’s call to prayer goes forth from a new Islamic masjid, or prayer center.

“Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, La ilaha ila Allah,” — “God is great, God is great, there is no god but God.”

Because of the religious syncretism between Catholicism and Vodou, it is difficult to estimate the number of Vodouists in Haiti. The CIA currently estimates that approximately 50 percent Haiti's population practices Voodoo, with nearly all Voodooists participating in one of Haiti's Christian denominations.

But followers of Islam have recently stepped into the public eye. Muslim men distinctive in their kufi headwear and finely groomed beards, and women in traditional scarves, are now seen on the streets of several cities.

Nawoon Marcellus, who comes from the northern city of San Raphael, recently became the first Muslim elected to the Chamber of Deputies, Haiti’s lower house of Parliament.

“I returned to Haiti in 1985 just to preach Islam,” said Abdul Al-Ali, the Delmas mosque’s white-bearded, commanding imam, or spiritual leader. “I converted while I was in Canada and we bought the space for the mosque in 1993.”

“Haitians would like to have Truth and Islam will bring it to them. If we follow Allah the Almighty, I think things can change.”

In impoverished Haiti, beset by a faltering economy, malnutrition, political violence and a two-year-old electoral dispute that has led to a freeze on \$500 million of international aid, some converts find the attention Islam devotes to charity and social justice particularly appealing.

“If you see someone who is in need, the ones who need help, whether it’s education,

money or what have you, we Haitians as a whole tend to be very generous in helping with one another,” said Racin Ganga, the imam of the Carrefour Feuilles Center, who attended college and was introduced to Islam in New York.

“Those who don’t have anything tend to help out. It is in some way inborn to us as Haitians, as well as Muslims, to help out. So that principle of responsibility, of helping those less fortunate, resonated very well.”

Yacine Khelladi, an Algerian economist who has conducted an informal survey of the religion in Haiti, said in its idealized form, Islam could address many of Haiti’s needs, including social justice, literacy and a sense of community.

“It even regulates business, land disputes, banking and other things — all of which could be perceived as attractive in Haiti as an alternative model,” Khelladi said.

The study of Islam has also resulted in some provocative new theories about Haitian history, including a revisionist view of Boukman, a rebel slave who inspired other slaves to rise up against their colonial masters. “Boukman was never a voodoo priest, like they say; he was a Muslim,” said Samaki Foussoyni, a worshiper at the Delmas mosque.

“When they describe his name, Boukman, in English, as he was from Jamaica, they are really describing ‘book man,’ because of the book he was always reading, which the French here in Haiti always referred to as an “upside-down” book,” Foussoyni said.

“They described it as such because it was the Qur’an, which you read left to right. When they say they had a voodoo ceremony at Bois Cayman, where Boukman lived, it was in fact ‘Bwa Kay Imam,’ or ‘the woods of the house of the imam’ in Creole.”

Although the mosques are locally maintained and receive no assistance from Islamic charities abroad, the nascent faith got an international boost from the US-led military force that entered Haiti in 1994 to restore exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power.

“The Pakistani and Bangladeshi soldiers came to our mosque to pray and enjoy our faith and they encouraged us with this belief,” Al-Ali said.

Conscious of their status as outsiders in overtly voodoo and Catholic Haiti, a nation that endured decades of dictatorship and brutal military repression, Muslims are quick to stress the peaceful nature of their faith and to distance themselves from the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

“Allah says that if a man kills another man it is as if he has killed all humanity,” said Racin Ganga. “The people who did what they did in New York, they are not even human. Islamic people should use the weapon of their love, because violence, as we’ve seen here in Haiti, will not take us anywhere.”
