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***Growing Up Muslim In A U.S. Community :  
Implications For Human Rights***

**By :**

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### Introduction

This paper is on the upbringing of Muslim children of international students enrolled in a mid-western college town. It is based on an ethnographic study using mainly participant observations, personal interviews and some artifacts collected during the course of the observations (Spindler, 1987; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984; Gilmore and Glatthorn, 1982; Heath, 1982; Wilson, 1977). The purpose of ethnographic research is "to describe and interpret cultural behavior" (Wolcott in Spindler and Spindler, 1987, p. 43). Similarly this study attempts to describe and understand how Muslim children grow up in an alien environment. It addresses the problems that the children and their parents have encountered and the strategies utilized by both parties to live in this new 'host culture'.

This paper describes the data, highlights some of the important findings of the ethnographic study and at the same time attempts to relate these findings to the issue of human rights. Subsequently by understanding children's activities and their everyday interactions perhaps we can also infer their true aspirations. They

may indicate to us the types of environment and the nature of the world they want to live in.

### Data Collection

This study group consisted of 18 elementary school-aged children from 13 Muslim families. They ranged from 6 to 11 years old and were from many different countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and were bonded only by their religious faith, Islam. The parents of these children also served as informants, as did Muslim leaders in this town, and public school teachers who interact regularly with the children and their parents.

The study examined the learning processes that occurred informally in school as well as those that took place in the homes and the society. For more than a year I visited the Sunday Islamic School, the children's playground to observe and to record events, and to interview Muslim children and their parents. For almost three years I participated in every Islamic religious activity in the mosque and in other designated locations. Occasionally I visited my informants' homes to gain a better perspective of the

parent-child's pattern of interaction.

Observations in the public school were carried out intensively for six months and were confined to the non-classroom setting. Specifically, these observations were made in the school playground, in the school cafeteria, and in the school hallways during recess and lunch time. Observations were focussed on children's peer interactions, play, and conversations. During the course of these observations the children were also interviewed both formally and informally. Observations were not made in classrooms because this study emphasized informal cultural learning.

Feedback from teachers and administrators were also collected through formal interviews. These interviews were held toward the end of my field work. Their perceptions and feedback were later analyzed and compared to those of Muslim parents and children.

#### Summary and Discussion of Findings

Informants of the study in general indicated that Muslim children acted similar to their American peers - showing self confidence, asking many questions, mingling with American and other International children freely, and developing new habits and interests such as

love for American sports and entertainment. The changes in the behavior patterns of Muslim children into 'American Style' patterns were the result of their interactions with the environment, particularly with their new American friends and the school. Television also played an important role in influencing these children.

It was observed that in cross-cultural interactions children devised their own strategies to adapt their old behavior patterns to suit the expectations of the dominant group. This process of behavior modification while adopting a new culture is what anthropologists refer to as acculturation (Wolcott, 1982). I learned from the study that international Muslim children developed their English language skills in a short time. Public school teachers and the children themselves indicated that with the English language skills Muslim children were able to socialize and function as normal children; they made new friends, developed new hobbies and interests, and became part of the bigger American society.

However, this by no means suggests that Muslim children completely lost their traditional culture

while learning from this rich cross-cultural environment. From the ways they interacted with their parents and other Muslim adults, these children showed concern and awareness for their traditional values. Both children and parents confirmed that they strived to maintain their traditional Islamic values regardless of the environment and the situation they were in. This process of maintaining their traditional values is called the enculturation process (Wallace, 1973).

Previous research has found that the first generation Muslim immigrants in the United States saw their religiosity wane (Elkholy, 1966; Haddad in Abraham and Abraham, 1983). They tended to lose their Muslim identity and their children were completely acculturated as Americans. However, the subjects of the present study were international Muslim students and families who were "more committed to an Islamic way of life" (Haddad, in Abraham and Abraham, 1983, p. 68).

One of the most important observations is the influence of family or parents on their children. Studies on early adolescents reveal that in beliefs and cultural values family members are the most influential forces (Ianni, 1989; Nielsen, 1987). Accordingly, the

present study suggests that despite the pervasiveness of American culture, Muslim parents play important roles and have a significant influence over their elementary school children's cultural values, particularly concerning matters of religion.

The reason for such behaviors are probably due to the age level of these children -- six to eleven years old -- whose parents function as the most significant others in their lives. Child informants told me that their parents constantly advised and reminded them about the principles and the values of Islam. They explained that they recited Qur'an, performed daily prayers, and fasted during the month of Ramadan because their parents insisted that they do so for their own good and for Islam. In fact, the children explained that they attended Sunday Islamic School regularly, helped each other, worked in groups and tried to behave themselves as best as they could simply because their parents always wanted them to be that way.

Muslim parents and public school teachers seemed to agree that while living in a foreign culture, Muslim parents are more likely to be closer to their children since they are fully aware that they cannot rely on

socio-cultural environments. From observations and interviews I noticed that they were required to be closer to their children and to be concerned about their Islamic education because the cultural environment was mostly at odds with their traditional values and aspirations. Therefore, they deliberately employed various strategies such as bringing their children to communal Friday prayer, sending them to Sunday Islamic School, teaching them the Qur'an and celebrating major Islamic holidays joyously and as best as they could, to ensure that amidst the strong 'host culture' their children were exposed to the fundamentals of Islamic teachings.

Muslim parents and their children's awareness to the religion could also be partly due to the duration of their "sojourns" in this country. The parents admitted that they must be very particular about their children's behavior patterns and religious practices since they would be going back to their home countries. Very often they argued that their purpose for coming to the United States was to earn a degree and return to their respective countries. Children confirmed the same reasons for practicing prayers, fasting in the



month of Ramadan and reciting the Qur'an since their parents always told them that they were not going to live in this country. Hence, Muslim parents felt that it was important for their children to start learning and practicing all these Islamic ways of life here in this country and when they were still very young.

From observations and interviews it has been shown that the Muslim parents in this college town were rational in their thinking. They were neither fundamentalists nor extremists. Being highly educated and successful they were by no means disturbed living in this non-Islamic environment. They never showed any sign of withdrawal from the dominant society, but immersed themselves in a variety of cultural events promoting cross-cultural understanding in this small town. They organized an Islamic exhibition, Islamic Day, an Open House, and an Islamic Dinner to raise funds for the needy in this city. They participated in the International Street Fair and other international activities. They never showed any suspicions or dissatisfaction toward the public school. Apparently, they wanted their children to socialize and to learn from this cross-cultural experience provided that their

children were careful to maintain their Islamic principles and values.

We can see their flexibility when we consider their arguments for establishing the Sunday Islamic school. They realized that three to four hours per week of Islamic teaching was insufficient compared to 30 hours per week of what children learned in the public school. However, they believed that the Sunday Islamic school could provide a greater awareness of Islam, while serving as a means of exposing their children to the significance of their religion and its values. Parents also felt that the Sunday Islamic school could reinforce what they had been trying to instill in their children about Islam, since American culture is a strong outside influence on their families.

Saran (1985) in his study on Asian Indian in the United States indicated that "Indian parents with young children are particularly active in observing religious functions and visiting temples" (p. 98). Likewise, our data revealed similar patterns of behaviors among Muslim parents and their children in this college town. They seemed to be more particular in observing

religious functions, activities, rituals, and festivities, and visiting the mosque here in this alien environment than in their home lands. The reason for this type of behavioral pattern may be, as pointed out by several informants, that unless deliberate attempts and interventions were employed, their children would not have enough religious and cultural knowledge. If they were living in their home Islamic countries, they would not be so particular about these concerns because they would know that they could not avoid certain Islamic environments or experiences and their children would be exposed to the Islamic culture.

However, amidst the commitment and desire for Islamic values that they wished to perpetuate in their children, Muslim parents admitted that they encountered problems in this American environment. In their discussions, expressions such as "We are having problems", "We must be realistic", "Our children grew up in a different culture", "It is difficult", all convey one specific meaning: they were experiencing constraints in educating or training their children in Islamic ways, owing to a variety of environmental forces including American peers.

In sum, the study suggests that the line between enculturation and acculturation is not clear. Based on the data one can say that enculturation and acculturation processes do not necessarily occur separately but go hand in hand. There are elements of both behaviors in these Muslim children. In other words, they showed dual behaviors -- American and Muslim. It was observed that they used their own manner of accomodating and assimilating with American friends, but they maintained their Islamic principles. They got along well with their American friends, participated in sports and other school activities, read American publications, watched all sorts of TV programs and showed strong preferences for American dress. However, they did not accept everything from the dominant culture; they practiced their own ways and were careful about matters that touched religious principles. For example, they made sure that they ate foods which were permissible in Islam or halal. They conformed strongly to their parents' values and aspirations by joining in prayers, reciting Qur'an, attending the Islamic Sunday school, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and celebrating their major holidays.

### Implications on the Issue of Human Rights

The United States of America is a democratic country well-known for its tolerance, respect for human freedom and equal rights. This is an important factor which enables a minority group, such as the Muslim in this college town to continually maintain 'their own ways', different from the dominant group in a pluralistic society. Moreover, Islam as a religion is not an unusual practice and belief in this country; there are many American Muslim communities, especially in big cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Washington D. C., and Toledo.

In addition, we must also remember that the study was carried out in a university town. The status of a university town itself depicts a different picture from a traditional or conservative American town. It is a place of academic excellence where students come from all over the world to study in various fields. It has become a multi-cultural center. Local citizens are mainly people who have been exposed to various cultures of the world and they are very receptive and very open in their thinking. Activities organized by foreign students are supported as long as they are not

disturbing to the public. Evidently, the rights of International students to maintain and propagate their cultures have never been denied by local citizens.

Inevitably, this study acknowledges the importance of peer influences and the school on children. This is especially true in their social lives. The children's behavior patterns are similar to those of their American friends. Informants reveal that Muslim children grow up to be very confident and expressive. They are no longer passive and scared to talk to people but always ready to engage themselves in discussions with their friends and parents.

The opportunity to express themselves freely and become more articulated in their conversations is a gem of experience for these Muslim children. This is simply because in their countries Muslim children are not fully encouraged to express their opinion. A quiet child is considered better than the talkative one. However, this perception is increasingly changing among the new generation. There is an increasing number of modern parents who want their children to be more active, talkative and inquisitive in the hope that they would be successful in their education.

Teachers play a vital role in nurturing and creating a sense of awareness among children on the importance of respecting other people. The notion that "we are different yet the same" should be accepted in its positive perspective. We can be different in terms of color, ethnicity, and religion but we are all human beings who strive to make our lives happy and prosperous. We may come from many different countries, yet we share a common mission, that is, to make the world a better place to live in. In school the curriculum and learning activities should emphasize the importance of this mission. Hopefully children of the 21st century would hold a high regard for world peace and individual freedom.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes the study on Muslim children growing up in a small mid-western city in America. An understanding of this group of children provides a general picture of enculturation and acculturation processes resulting from the socio-cultural environment. In other words, this paper shows how the Muslim children, with the guidance of their parents and with support from the Muslim community, enculturate or

keep their traditional Islamic values. Simultaneously this paper presents the effects of continuous contact of a minority group, the Muslim community, with the host culture, the Americans. As a result, Muslim children apparently modify their cultural behaviors or acculturate in the ways of the dominant group.

This paper creates an awareness and understanding on the dynamics of cross-cultural learning. It reveals that children, as active participants, do not internalize everything in the cultural learning processes. In fact, they are capable of selecting and choosing and remaining true to their Islamic principles and values especially on matters related to belief and faith or Iman. Evidently this is achieved through the efforts of their Muslim parents and the Muslim community.

Some insights on the issue of human rights are also discussed. We have gathered from this paper that United States as a leading democratic nation offers every opportunity for any group of people to practice any religion of their choice. Foreign children are free to grow up, and learn from the host culture. Members of the community appear to show great respect



and interest in foreign cultures and after interacting with the foreigners, they themselves, in fact, become more sensitive to a variety of cultural issues.

\* Note:

This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation,  
Growing Up Muslim In America: The Dynamic of Cross-  
Cultural Learning In A Small United States Community.  
Ohio University, 1991.

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