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FRANCE

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France's Hidden Muslims: A Weekend with the Union of Islamic Organizations

By K.A. Dilday

APRIL 2007

At Le Bourget in April, I saw the hidden community of French Muslims. They live in the suburbs or the outer arrondissements of Paris. Many exist entirely in their own communities, the men working manual labor jobs, selling perfume or jewelry on the street, running little mom-and-pop stores — although the mom usually remains hidden — the women perhaps doing housecleaning or a bit of sewing for money.

It wasn't until the 24th annual meeting of French Muslims at Le Bourget, a suburb just outside of Paris, that I realized how insular these worlds are. The weekend-long gathering is sponsored by the UOIF (*l'Union des Organisations Islamiques de France* - Union of Islamic Organizations) in France. The UOIF was created in 1982 when 15 Muslim organizations, largely with Tunisian links, were allowed to coordinate their efforts after an 80-year-old law forbidding foreigners from forming non-profit organizations in France was amended in 1981. Since 1984 the UOIF has held an annual gathering for French Muslims to meet one another and discuss issues of concern. The 24th meeting was held in early April, on the eve of a hotly debated presidential election. Political and social analysts offered their opinions, yet it was an Egyptian Koranic scholar, little known to the non-Arabic speaking world, who drew the largest audience. The issue that mattered to the rest of France, the election, scarcely mattered to the men and women attending the gathering, even though French newspapers had for weeks talked of little else. In their world, Sheikh Omar Abdelkafi's interpretation of the Koran's view on male-female relations was far more compelling.

Sheikh Abdelkafi spoke on Saturday, the first full day of the annual gathering. The day before — and even earlier that Saturday — I'd easily found a chair each time I'd entered the lecture hall. Just before Sheikh Abdelkafi came on I was vainly looking for a seat, tripping over the numerous baby strollers, yet at every empty seat I tried to take someone waved me away. Then Sheikh Abdelkafi appeared and a wave of women rushed toward the stage. I realized that women had friends guarding their places as they raced to take photographs of their version of a rock star. He was dressed in a well-cut Western suit. Sheikh Abdelkafi didn't look like my idea of a sheikh.

As he began to speak, I realized why Muslim women loved him: "The man must not take the woman's money from her," he told them. "The man must buy the woman makeup if she wants it so that she can look beautiful for him ... The man must not take a second wife unless the first wife allows it." Sheikh Abdelkafi spoke in Arabic, pausing periodically for the French interpretation. Ah, I thought, so that's it (when I was able to hear the French over the two women behind me who would chatter animatedly during the French translation, discussing what he'd just said in Arabic). And then he was finished and I watched as the hall emp-



A sea of hijabs move toward the door after listening to Sheikh Abdelkafi.

ried. It wasn't even prayer time. Where were they all going? I realized that the crowd was moving to a rhythm I did not know.

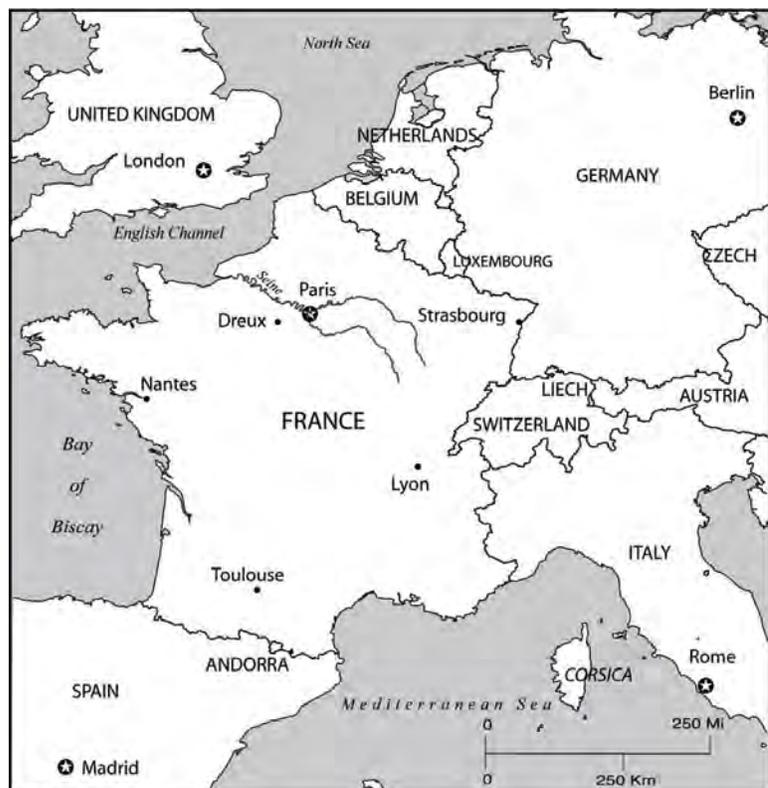
In the lecture hall, cassettes of Sheikh Abdelkafi's teachings were being sold underneath large posters with his face. I thought he must be a well-known scholar. Yet, later, when I searched the Internet to learn more, I could find little other than a brief mention in a 1994 article by Youssef M. Ibrahim in the *New York Times*. Ibrahim wrote that in tapes for sale in Egypt, Sheikh Abdelkafi had said that Muslims should not shake hands with Christians nor even share a sidewalk with them. I know that Sheikh Abdelkafi has been around selling tapes for at least 15 years. He has an Arabic-language website. Yet I searched media databases, widening my search to include all the romance languages and there is scarcely a mention of him. After a year of being in France, I was finally getting a real glimpse at what moves France's hidden Muslim communities, although unfortunately, the full impact of that did not strike me until after the meeting.

It seemed that almost all of the women at the Le Bourget meeting wore a hijab; darker-skinned women from sub-Saharan Africa were more likely to wear an al-amira, a close fitting cap with a scarf over it. They are the people who live in the outer districts or largely in city suburbs and rarely leave them. In central Paris, I almost never see a woman in a veil and long djellabah, the loose-fitting robe North Africans wear to cover their clothes. I see more in my

neighborhood, in Northern Paris, but during the week, I mostly see Muslim men, at the bars and little shops in my neighborhood. As for the women, I see them every Saturday morning as they push their carts into the backs of my legs at the frenzy that is the North African greenmarket under the subway tracks at the border of the 18th arrondissement. This was a crucial step in learning what mattered to them.

Just a week after the conference, I met Natacha Henry, a co-author of the recently released book *Exciseuse: An interview with Hawa Gréou*. Ms. Gréou is a Malian woman, resident in France since 1979, who had performed clitoridectomies on infants and girls

in France for ten years before she was arrested, tried and sentenced to eight years in prison in 1999. That part of Hawa Gréou's story was well covered in the news media at the time. But Hawa Gréou was also a victim of ignorance and isolation. Sixty-three-years old, Mama Gréou, as she is known, is the first and only legal wife of a 75-year-old French-Senegalese/Malian man who favors his third 35-year-old "wife." He gives Mama Gréou no money for food or living, and has told her that he



has divorced her—she must leave their home in Drancy, a suburb just outside of Paris. The book's third co-author is Linda Weil-Curiel, the lawyer who prosecuted her. Weil-Curiel has since become Gréou's advocate. Ms. Weil-Curiel is helping Mama Gréou find an apartment, but she also acts in part as her French life and law instructor. "In France both people have to be involved in the divorce," Ms. Weil-Curiel told Mama Gréou. Mama Gréou who speaks almost no French, says that the happiest time in her life was when she was in prison with a room of her own away from the torments of her husband and co-wives who have been trying to discard her for many years. Unable to read in any language, Mama Gréou passed her time in prison listening to Koranic tapes. Perhaps Sheikh Abdelkafi's were among them. I feel quite thick writing this, but I've always wondered why the market for tapes by Koranic scholars is so large. And I've finally realized that it is because the majority of the Muslim world, including many extremely devout Muslims in Western countries, like Mama Gréou, can't read.

When Sheik Abdelkafi finished speaking at Le Bourget, I stayed to hear the lecture by Fouad Alaoui, the senior vice president of the UOIF on the presidential elections. I had thought it would be well attended but the hall was so empty that I had no problem finding a seat in the front row. A discussion of the presidential election was obviously far less interesting to the crowd than Sheikh's Abdelkafi's pronouncements on male-female relations. The next day the major French papers ran articles about the annual gathering. The headlines were about Mr. Alaoui's speech and his pronouncements on the candidates. I think I saw their reporters. They were the people sitting in the front section of the empty hall taking notes along with me when everyone else had gone. Sheikh Abdelkafi didn't rate a mention.

There were a few places the departing crowds could go. In addition to the lecture hall, the conference offered a prayer center, a question center, Dar-El Fatwa and an exhibition hall.

The exhibition hall was a bustling center for commerce and for the transfer of funds in the name of Islam. There were charities in support of Palestine, Califat sweatshirts and t-shirts for the Westernized Muslim, djellabahs for the traditional Muslims, tapes



Califat-wear

of Sheik Abdelkafi's lectures, some by Hani Ramadan (brother of Tariq) who also spoke, Koranic paraphernalia and books, animated films of the Life of the Prophet for children, I-pod-like devices with the Koran loaded, Halal baby food. But the most prominent presence in the room by far was the fund-raisers for the mosques. Every few feet, someone was soliciting money to build a mosque.

This has long been an issue in France. As I mentioned in KAD-9, the 1905 French law of secularity forbids using state money to build religious structures. By then, France already had numerous churches. Although mosques can obtain some assistance by using the laws that benefit non-profit cultural organizations, usually low-cost long-term leases or assistance from the regional government in securing a loan, a group of people that wants a mosque in their community usually must raise the money to build it through private donations. Fund-raisers had booths with architectural drawings of the planned mosque. One had key chains for sale. Men walked around in soft sandwich-board-type sheaths with a line drawing of a mosque shaking cans. Two men handed out a form to fill in so you could give their mosque project a weekly disbursement. In 2000, a report by the High Council on Integration estimated the number of mosques or Muslim prayer sites at 1558. In 2007, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported the number at approximately 2000. These range from small meeting rooms to the seven grand mosques.

Recognizing that it behooved the state to have Islamic instruction where it can see it, *i.e.* in large public mosques rather than small private settings, there have been several initiatives to find ways around the 1905 law



Imports: Collecting coins for a German mosque!

and help communities build large, visible mosques.

Yet some imams prefer to preach under cover. Mama Gréou, who faithfully attended mosque, finally made peace with stopping clitoridectomies when she found out it wasn't in the Koran. It wasn't the imams who told her but the people who prosecuted her. In these closed communities imams can exist in shadows and the Arabic language also cloaks them from the authorities. The interior ministry has made it a mission to ensure that all imams speak French. Arabic makes it that much harder for watchful authorities to decipher their message. Sheikh Omar Abdelkafi, who seems not to exist outside of the Muslim community, is a primary example. An educated sophisticated Egyptian man who most likely speaks English, Sheikh Abdelkafi prefers to maintain his web presence in Arabic, which certainly prevents a lot of people like me from finding out what he's about. The message I heard was peaceful, but Ibrahim's 1994 articles suggest that some of Sheikh Abdelkafi's other messages may not be.

Lhaj Thami Breze, the president of the UOIF who followed Sheikh Abdelkafi on stage that day spoke about the history of the organization. He was not a comfortable speaker, nor was the text of his speech very interesting: it was a rundown of names and dates. Yet I noted that Mr. Breze mentioned Nicolas Sarkozy's name at least seven times, repeatedly referring to his actions in support of Muslims and creating the Muslim

Council, the national representative body of which Mr. Breze is vice president. It was a not-so-subtle show of support for Mr. Sarkozy's bid for presidency, a surprise after the Muslim groups' disappointment (cited in KAD-9) over Mr. Sarkozy's support for the defendant when French Muslim groups sued over the reprinting of the Danish Prophet cartoons in France.

Mr. Breze was followed by the UOIF's senior vice president, who gave a speech on the presidential options. The vice president, Mr. Alaoui, said from the podium that Muslims should avoid extremes of either right or left and stay toward the center. He ended by saying that these elections were not the be all and end all; there would be others. The UOIF did not want to interfere in their choice. It had faith in the people's judgment. The newspaper reporters took Mr. Alaoui's speech as one of support for Francois Bayrou, the center right party candidate who talked about bridging the divide between right and left. The difference between the two UOIF leaders' messages struck me. The UOIF is the most powerful Muslim organization in France in terms of popular adherence, and effective organization, yet the two top people, Mr. Breze and Mr. Alaoui, appeared to be of different minds about whom to support in the presidential election. I then realized why experts so often tell me that it will be a long time before Muslims and Blacks become a political force, able to demand changes that benefit Muslims and place Muslims in state positions. They can't deliver votes. On this day, it was Segolene Royal, the candidate of the Socialist Party who was the loser. Neither of these two Muslim elders seemed to support her. But, then, in truth, it didn't matter much, because few people other than the reporters and me were listening.

Interestingly, Mr. Alaoui said that all of the presidential candidates had been invited to the meeting but all declined. Reputed to be involved with the Muslim Brotherhood, the UOIF has a reputation as a more conservative Muslim organization compared to the other major force in the Muslim communities, the Paris mosque, which has always been close to the French government and is largely centered on Paris. The UOIF has a stronger position among the national Muslim community because it is well organized throughout France. Only in recent years has the UOIF begun to work with the administration. And Mr. Breze a native Tunisian, only became a French citizen in 2005, despite holding the presidency of UOIF since 1993. Despite its efforts to become more mainstream, none of the candidates seemed to want to risk being seen at the gathering. But in the two days I spent there, I neither heard nor saw controversial teachings. Even Hani Ramadan, reputedly a hard-line fundamentalist, ended his speech by saying: "A good Muslim is a good citizen." (Although Mr. Ramadan is Swiss.)

The next speech was a surprise. The program gave the topic as "Examples of Islamophobic Acts" delivered

by Boubaker El Hadj Amor, a member of the UOIF executive council, from Poitou-Charentes, a region in central Western France. I expected it to be a litany of physical attacks, or perhaps mosque desecration, things which don't happen often, but happen regularly. But Mr. Amor's had a much more subtle idea of Islamophobia as an insidious mentality among the news media and politicians rather than the easily identifiable overt acts. He began by saying that Western countries tried to portray Islam as irrational, primitive, sexist, violent and aggressive. He cited three issues that had been in the news: reports that Muslims were resistant to the idea of male doctors examining Muslim women, sometimes to the point of violence, forced marriages and the cartoon trials.

Mr. Amor pointed out that 50 percent of women, Muslim or not, ask to see a female gynecologist at French hospitals, that there were relatively few acts of violence against doctors and that not all of them were committed by Muslims. "It's not unusual for a woman to want to see a female doctor," he said. A statistic he said had been released, that 200 women per day were forced into marriage in Islam, was untrue. But his most interesting interpretation was of the cartoon trial in February (covered in KAD-9). Several Muslim organizations, including the UOIF, sued Charlie Hebdo, the satirical political magazine that reprinted some of the controversial cartoons. Mr. Amor said that the news media's coverage of the judgment as an acquittal for Charlie Hebdo did not tell the full story. The judge ruled that two of the cartoons were not insulting. But he ruled that one of the cartoons was offensive and insulting to Muslims, while free speech was the more sacred principle. "But that's not true," Mr. Amor said. "Provocation and hate against Muslims should be punished."

In between his speech and the following one I approached one of the few women who remained. Like most of the women, Hanane wore a hijab. But unlike most, she sat alone, listening intently. Twenty-one-years old, she lives in Paris and had come in for the day to work at one of the booths in the exhibition hall. "What do you think of the program?" I asked. "It was interesting" she said—Mr. Amor's speech seemed to have resonated most with her. "All of those false figures they give. Islamophobia is a perversion promoted



Dar-El Fatwa, Seeking guidance



by the politicians." Hanane said she voted in every election, but she didn't know who she would vote for in the presidential election. She wasn't pleased with any of the candidates: "It's a choice of the least bad." I had to leave her then as the next speech began and she wanted to listen. The speaker was another theologian and I chose that time to wander out into the courtyard.

The Dar-El Fatwa tent sat in the middle of the yard. "Dar-El Fatwa" a handmade sign on the outside read. "Ask your questions about religion." Two young men stood monitoring the entrances and exits. They were very polite but I wasn't allowed to enter and could only keep the photos after I showed them exactly what I had taken. They confirmed that inside the tent Muslims asked imams for answers to questions about Koranic law—the answers are the fatwa, an educated opinion of a Koranic scholar. There was a steady trickle of people. I saw couples, women alone and men alone. Some sat for only a few moments, others sat for longer. Again I

thought of Mama Gréou who had to be told by Western lawyers that there was no law mandating clitoridectomies in the Koran. She was well known in the community, and people traveled from as far away as Marseille to have her cut their daughters. What did her imam tell her, I wondered, when she went to him for counsel?

Mama Gréou probably would never have been at a meeting like this. Her husband preferred her uninformed and housebound. He managed to keep her that way even in central Paris, where they lived for many years in a neighborhood that now boasts trendy restaurants and hip young residents. She first came to the attention of the police when her French neighbors reported women lining up with babies at her door and screams. Now Mama Gréou has no occupation, no source of income. She leaves her home to go to the mosque and to social services, where they give her the food that her husband and his other wife and their children refuse to share with her. Despite her 28 years in France, Mama Gréou is not a resident. Her husband, a French citizen always refused to give her the documents she needed for her application. And now that she has been convicted of a crime she can never be a citizen.

Mama Gréou is an extreme example, *I think*. But I don't know. Most of the women who I approached did not want to speak or seemed not to understand me. I had much better luck with the people at booths who, perhaps because of their outreach position, seemed more accustomed to dealing with people outside of the Muslim community. I spoke with two people who were collecting surveys about what Muslims might want from an Islamic bank. They hope to model a bank that allows Muslims to buy homes and cars in accordance

with Muslim law. I met a student from the French Muslim students' association who seemed happy and well integrated in the university community.

But it is the people like Mama Gréou, a woman who has been in France for almost three decades yet speaks almost no French, whom I never meet. Their husbands keep them hidden. Yet since Nicolas Sarkozy made it mandatory that all people applying for a resident's permit of more than a year speak French, the free classes that many associations offer in these communities have been filling up. A teacher in Dreux told me that the husbands walk their wives to class and look to make sure that the teacher is a woman before leaving them. But at least the women are finally getting there.

When I think back to the conference I understand why Sheikh Abdelkafi's lecture made the women swoon, take photos and pull out their video cameras. I am just beginning to discover that the Dutch-Somalian activist, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, is right. She claims that Westerners have no idea what goes on in the insular communities in their midst. She criticizes Western liberals tendency to leave immigrant communities to themselves as a sign of respect for their culture.

I've met and spoken with hundreds of Muslim women in France who are well-integrated, perfectly Francophone and completely comfortable in French society. Yet my experience at the annual meeting of French Muslims makes me wonder how many of the women who refused to speak to me there are like Mama Gréou: caught in their little nations within a nation, putting their faith in Allah as explained by Sheikh Abdelkafi, for a little bit of kindness and freedom. □

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Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for The *New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

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A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

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As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

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An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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