Garbi Schmidt

The Good Citizen and the Good Muslim: The Nexus of Disciplining the Self and Engaging the Public

MIM WORKING PAPER SERIES 17:6
The Good Citizen and the Good Muslim: The Nexus of Disciplining the Self and Engaging the Public

Abstract
Based on two fieldworks in Chicago this working paper discusses the role that an Islamic organization – the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) – plays for the invigoration of the deprived neighborhood Chicago Lawn. The working paper describes and analyses IMAN’s claim to so-called ghetto cosmopolitanism, its building on past race-based struggles in the neighborhood, and also how IMAN challenges ideas of correct religious practice within the American Muslim community. The particular context of the working paper is the festival “Takin’ it to the Streets” which is one of IMANs most prolific activities. Via its focus on popular music, graffiti art and talks the festival can be seen as an example of teaching the public – both about a minority religion but also about the potential resources of a deprived inner-city neighborhood.

Key Words
Islam, United States, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, minorities.

Bio Notes
Garbi Schmidt is a professor of Intercultural Studies at the University of Roskilde, Denmark. She holds a Phd in Islamic Studies and a Dr. Phil in migration research. Schmidt’s research includes anthropological studies of Muslim and immigrant communities in the United States and Scandinavia, and historical and anthropological studies of migration to Copenhagen. Recent publications include “Going beyond methodological presentism: Examples from a Copenhagen neighborhood 1885-2010”, Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora (2017) and “Space, Politics and Past-Present Diversities in a Copenhagen Neighbourhood”, In Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power (2016)

Contact
garbi@ruc.dk
Muslims in the Public Arena: The Ethics and Formation of Citizenship

Although increasingly acknowledging bottom-up aspects of citizenship practice (also religious, see e.g. Putnam & Campbell 2010), existing research literature still predominantly describes the concept and practice of citizenship – and citizenship education - as state driven, top-down defined practices. Accordingly, the literature frames the possible range of citizen agency according to nation state models, whether ethnic, republican or multicultural (e.g. Brochmann 180-81) According to the ethnic model of citizenship, this status is a birthright, something you own due to you being born and rooted in a specific national context (the ethnic model). Both the republican and the multicultural are more explicit in the formative elements of citizenship. Citizenship is something that you earn, when you have the right qualifications (e.g. language skills, attachment to the labor market). Importantly, according to the two later models, citizenship is something you learn (also Brochmann 2003).

The defining – and disciplining - framework of the nation state is indeed central for how citizenship is enacted and distributed. However, as noted by Will Kymlicka, modern democracies depend on the qualities, attitudes – and in that sense agency and acceptance - of their citizens, including “their sense of identity, and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic or religious identities….their desire to participate in the political process to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable… (Kymlicka 2001, 294). Discussing “the nature “ of citizenship in liberal democracy, Kymlicka stresses that certain virtues are important: 1) Public-spiritedness, including the ability to evaluate the performance of those in office, and the willingness to engage in public discourse; 2) a sense of justice, and the capacity to discern and respect the rights of others, and to moderate one’s claims accordingly, 3) civility and tolerance, 3) a shared sense of solidarity or loyalty (Kymlicka 2001, 296).

Kymlicka’s contribution is important for my focus in this chapter; how a Muslim organization engages in the process of citizen education as a formative project, pointing to the moral and ethic implications of citizenship (and the process of learning to be a citizen). However, Kymlicka is rather vague about the actual, hierarchical and often discriminatory measures that states direct towards particular minority groups, not least when certain groups within dominant discourses are seen as inherently problematic and potentially disloyal. Here, Aihwa Ong’s employing and developing the concept of cultural citizenship offers relevant insights. Ong stresses how cultural citizenship enhances “cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state in its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory” (ibid., 738). Ong points to the elements of hierarchization (via classificatory factors such as race and class) that cultural(ist) understandings of citizenship employ, and that frame the citizen practices of groups and individuals.
The hierachization characterizing cultural citizenship is central to my description, but not merely as something that individuals and groups subject themselves to. People can also, particularly through collective actions, challenge such hierachization. The critical possibilities are also emphasized by scholars such as Sunaina Maira, who refers to Toby Miller’s definition of the concept:

The citizen is a polysemic category, open to contestation, an avatar for all parts of the spectrum .... It is a technology that produces a “disposition” [among citizens] not to accept the imposition of a particular form of government passively, but to embrace it actively as a collective expression of themselves (Miller 1993, 12, in Maira 2004a: 212)

Recent research underlies the multiple dimensions of citizen practices. As implicitly stated by Maira, practices of citizenship extend state constituted involvement in voting processes and political parties, and can take the form of protest movement (Norris 2002, Maira 2004b). Grass-roots movements may, for example, include formulations of the concept that compete with or seek to alter the content of citizenship. Acknowledging that formative processes of citizenship can come from below, and can include competitive elements (even when including and improving equality) that challenge existing hierarchies and discourses of otherness and problematic minority groups, are useful for our understanding of changing and competing formations of what it means to be a citizen.

Importantly, citizen practices do not exclusively refer to the state level but also to the framework of the city. Although citizenship as a legal concept cannot be detached from the nation state, the focus on citizenship as a formative process allows us to extend our focus to other contexts and through other lenses than that of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller 2002), including the spaces of everyday interaction, community engagement, and political – city based - activism. Urban spaces are characterized by a “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) both in the sense of person to person interaction, but also in terms of the institutionalization or such interaction – or the lack of such. And cities are the places where negotiations and conflicts over the meaning of citizenship beyond the legal imperative is perhaps the strongest.

The article builds on three periods of fieldwork in Chicago, taking place between 1995-1996, 1996-1997, and in 2010. During the two first fieldworks, I focused on the Muslim immigrant community in Chicago as a whole, and that with an overarching emphasis on religious (Muslim) identities and how such identities were played out vis-à-vis American society. Fifteen years later my focus was narrower, as my visit to the city mainly focused on IMAN and the festival “Takin’ It to the Streets” taking place on June 19th, 2010. Further, while my initial (doctoral) research focused on the dynamic between religious identity and a national context, my research focus has moved towards a larger consciousness of the city as a relational space (Schmidt 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, Schmidt 2012b; Schmidt 2015). During
my later fieldwork I was thus interesting in studying the relation between a (religious) minority organization and a specific urban space. How did the city of Chicago accommodate for minority citizens, and how did a minority – in this case characterized by the multifaceted yet frequently essentialized and stigmatized of Muslimness – engage with the city?

Space as a theoretical concept is open-ended, dynamic, negotiable, political, situated in time (Massey 2005). The city as we know it today is not the city that we will encounter in ten years time. New architecture, a changed infrastructure, the effects of financial crises, population growth or shrinkage, and changes in the ethnic, class-based and religious composition of neighborhoods are elements that we may encounter in changed cities. These mentioned examples are all physical, visible aspects of change, but they depend in various, intersecting ways on other aspects of the changing organism of the city, including that of shifting (or stable) political landscapes, of in and outward migration, global market economies, and definition of legal rights and plights and citizenship.

In this chapter, I will analyze IMAN as an example of Muslim-American formative processes citizenship and aspirations for cosmopolitanism: an ideology pointing to the ethical acknowledgement of a shared humanity and the practice hereof (Schiller & Irving 2015). Cosmopolitanism – whether global or local can be defined as a “civil society of different peoples, communities and individuals, considered as one” (James 2014: x). In section one I offer a description of the early days of IMAN, and its growing out of two particular activist environments: The Arab-American Community Center and the Muslim Students’ Association. In section two I describe some of the ideological baggage of IMAN, based on the leadership of Rami Nashashibi. In section three I describe how IMAN had grown into a strong advocate of intercultural, interreligious social activism on the Southside, offering and alternative (yet ideotypical) model of citizenship as civic engagement on – but also beyond - the Southside of Chicago. Finally, I offer a description of the main public event communicating - and thereby educating – IMANs ideas for Muslim active citizenship to the public: The 2010 Takin’ it to the Streets festival. In my conclusion I do – besides adding the final perspectives on IMAN as an advocate of particular notions of citizenship– shortly discuss whether and how such advocacy is particularly for the US case.

**Engaging Chicago Lawn: The Early Days of IMAN**

Since its inception in 1994, IMAN, the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, has worked in the neighborhood Chicago Lawn on the Southside of Chicago. In those days the neighborhood hosted a relatively large Arab–American, immigrant community. While the 1990 US Census reported 3,258 Arab immigrants lived in the area, community activists estimated the correct amount to be ten times higher (Cainkar 1998). The gap between the estimated number of Arab immigrant living in the neighborhood and official statistics
reflected well what most of my respondents told me during my first fieldwork: that many Palestinian immigrants came as undocumented, irregular – and thus unregistered - migrants.

By the mid-1990s, the Arab-American enclave in the neighborhood was a nucleus of considerable and growing institutionalization and organizing. One formal mosque existed in the area: The Chicago Islamic Center, founded 1989, and located at W 63rd Street and Heman. Another institution, the Arab American Community Center (AACC), was located at W 63rd, close to Kedzie Avenue.

Many of the activities in the AACC were directed towards the Palestinian cause. Illustratively, a feature article in the Chicago newspaper Daily Southtown, describing the Arab American community on Chicago’s Southwest side, carried a photo taken in the AACC: A young, Arab boy bend over his homework in front of a man-long Palestinian flag hanging on the wall (Deerin 1997). However, things were changing. As the AACC was situated in a neighborhood where many immigrant Palestinian families encountered the frequent hardships of American inner-city neighborhood - poverty, substance abuse, gang activities, incarceration and domestic violence - community activists began to focus on local social ills. While some activist in the AACC argued that such activities should be a continuation of the center’s secular work, directed towards Palestine, other activists moved towards other understandings of community, basing their initiatives on Islam. Islam was to many a part of their upbringing, however, they reinterpreted their religion according to the social experience of the US and the local conditions of Chicago Lawn. While the secular activists mainly targeted fellow Palestinians, religious activists were more universal in their approaches, focusing on communal suffering as a condition shared by many residents of Chicago Lawn regardless of race and ancestry. Suffering was seen as a condition that had to be fought within the Chicago Lawn community as such.

IMAN partially grew out of the AACC, partially out of many of the IMAN activists’ involvement with the MSA, the Muslim Students’ Association. The MSA has a history and an impact that goes far beyond Chicago. The organization was initiated by Muslim students in early 1963, with a clear focus on strengthening Islamic activities and identity in North America. The MSA relied heavily on support from transnational Islamic associations, such as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikwan al-Muslimin) (see e.g. Poston 1992; 102, Abdo 2006).

Although ideologically inspired by international Islamic movements, the activities of the Chicago chapters of the organization underlined a very local and identity driven focus. Many universities in the area had their own MSA chapter, including prominent schools such as De Paul, Northwestern, the University of Chicago, Loyola and University of Illinois in Chicago. Within these chapters different but also quote similar activities took place. First, chapters hosted Friday prayers and study groups. Second, they worked towards spreading
information of Islam, either consciously as da’wa [inviting people to Islam] or simply as a means to do away with prejudices about Islam. Finally, there were at least seeds being planted towards broader social activism of a more local and even political character, such as IMAN.

Rami Nashashibi

The AACC’s activist heritage and the local MSA chapters’ educative efforts (moving far beyond the campus environment) were undoubtedly important for the formation of IMAN. However, one individual in particular holds the key to understanding the progression and direction of IMAN: Rami Nashashibi. During both my fieldworks in the mid-nineties and in 2010, Nashashibi was a central figure in the organization. According to traditional sociological literature (and underlined by some of my respondents during my 2010 fieldwork) Nashashibi easily falls in the category of charismatic leadership: well-spoken, intelligent and energetic. During my initial fieldworks Nashashibi, who was then in his early 20s, was obviously in the early stages of his own formation as a community leader. He was always busy, always enthusiastic in his involvement with the children that turned up in the center, but so were many of the other staff members and volunteers in IMAN. However, during this formative period he showed his potential as an authority both when he gave sermons in the AACC, and in 1997 when he took the initiative for the first Takin’ it to the Streets festival. In these situations his enthusiasm and rhetorical talent made people both listen and – as Takin’ it to the Streets underlined – act in numbers. However, most often he was just a soft spoken, smiling youngster that everyone seemed to like.

One aspect of which Nashashibi was overwhelmingly conscious was his Muslim identity. He did, for example, always carry the kufi: a small woven hat underlining his choice. Although raised in an Arab/American family, Nashashibi describes his upbringing as utterly secular, and thus testifies his choice of Islam as a conversion (WBEZ 91.5, 2007, radio interview; Ramirez 2006).

Nashashibi ’s family immigrated to Chicago in the 1940s, and was among the first Arabs to settle down in Chicago Lawn (ibid). However, being born in a diplomat family, Nashashibi spent most of his childhood outside Chicago and the United States (the Hay Project, n.d.). As a young man, Nashashibi searched for a college in Chicago, the city that his mother came from, and enrolled in St. Xavier University and later University of De Paul (Ramirez 2006, Warren 2010). His transferring to Chicago was important for his developing a conscious Muslim identity. At college, he met people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and did, for example, see similarities between the struggle of Palestinians in the Middle East and African Americans in the United States. One mentor which he describes as an old member of the Black Panters, taught him that activism and Islam could indeed be integrated (Ramirez
According to Nashashibi, his Islamic identity was “shaped and crafted in Chicago” and the social circumstances of the city (WBEZ 91.5, 2007, radio interview). At the same time there is no doubt that Rami’s engagement in the struggle of multi-ethnic communities was molten by his childhood experiences in various corners of the world. As noted in one of the many media interviews that exist with him, he notes that: “I’ve been exposed to many different cultures and traditions, and that is a powerful thing. It really piqued my interest in engaging communities and developing a more intimate connection with them.” (De Paul magazine, 2010).

During a radio interview in June 2007 Rami Nashashibi described how his involvement in IMAN began. Initially, his engagement in Islamic activism had directed his attention towards the Cabrini Green Housing Project. He was on his way to the housing project when he received a phone call:

Actually, I never made it to the Cabrini Green. I was on my way there when I received a call from an executive director of the Southwest Youth Collaborative, which is Camille Odeh. She had heard about some of my work in other capacities and was pleaded with me about thinking about working on the Southwest side. She was making the case that many of the same polarizing issues of race and class that existed in areas like Cabrini Green where I wanted to go work were also present on the Southwest side. That was also coupled by the relative invisibility of the Muslim community and particularly younger Muslims who were growing up, who were mostly of Palestinian and Arab extraction on the Southwest side. Which was ironically the area that my mother grew up in and spent most of her life in (WBEZ 91.5, radio interview, 2007)

Camille Odeh is a well-known activist in Chicago Lawn and the AACC. That Nashashibi, together with other Muslim youths enrolled at De Paul, started carrying out their activities in Chicago Lawn was undoubtedly furthered by the AACC offering them space and support. Further, by focusing on the community in Chicago Lawn, Nashashibi and his peers could combine different aspects of their lives: Engagement in civic justice issues and deprived segments of the Muslim and Arab American community. For Nashashibi, family history also furthered his work in the neighborhood. As such, understanding the history of Chicago Lawn appears of great importance in his initial work:

As I learned more about what the Marquette Park represented in terms of both the history of tremendous intolerance and the fact that there was a racial flag point, it prompted me to understand how the community had gone from what it was to what it was becoming when I got involved with it, which was an increasingly African American, Latino, Arab and still some specs of white segments of community. And that history of a community, and as a person who works in the community, is still something that fascinates me. (WBEZ 91.5, radio interview, 2007)
Besides his engagement as a community activist on the Southside, Nashashibi pursued a professional academic career. In 2006, he presented his Ph.D. dissertation proposal at the University of Chicago (Nashashibi 2006). The proposal together with his later academic writings underline his personal engagement and activist focus. After introducing a couple of anecdotes on the mixing of Chicago gang culture, Islam and the transnational linkage to the Middle East, Nashashibi notes that:

My interest and activism in the contemporary urban ghetto began in the early 1990s while thinking through these types of anecdotal observations. In addition to unsettling notions of the ghetto as a space ensconced in hyper-isolation and parochialism, such encounters also signaled the development of an urban Muslim aesthetic and culture amid a set of transnational and global circuits. After a series of interviews, months of ethnography and years of community work, I began to assemble an intellectual project that hypothesized the emergence of a “global ghetto” as one way to further explore and theorize these discoveries (ibid: n.p.)

In his academic work, Nashashibi notably employs the concept of “ghetto cosmopolitanism”. Nashashibi notes that cosmopolitanism within existing scholarly work is most frequently associated with social elites. However – referring to a Chicago study from the late 1920s (Zorbaugh 1929) – he contests this notion. Cosmopolitanism, expressed both through culture, capital and flows of people, can according to Nashashibi also be understood and explored as a slum and ghetto phenomenon (Nashashibi 2007a, 124). Nashashibi’s focus on contested terms such as “slum”, “ghetto” and “gang” implies a preoccupation with “cosmopolitanism from below”: A concept that Nashashibi sees as inherently undercutting racist and elitist notions of what cosmopolitanism implies.

Nashashibi’s work as an academic mirrors his work as an activist and the ideas that has shaped IMAN as organization. Central to his work is his Islamic identity and, as he for example notes during radio interviews, the effects of hyper-racial segregation. Islam, in his work, is not “merely” a creed or a corpus of dogmas. Rather, the image that he offers of Islam is that of a driving force behind social change and communal development. Nashashibi describes Islam as exposing a cultural heterogeneity and plasticity. Undoubtedly provocatively to some, he describes how Islam is associated with American inner-city neighborhoods and even gangs. However, within these environments Islam crosscuts his work as a springboard for pride and qualities that are generally and socially interpreted as inherently elitist. Further, Islam’s transformative qualities are exposed through a large variety of cultural expressions. Elements that Nashashibi often refer to are those of hip-hop, music, art and community activism.

In his writings, Nashashibi stresses how the encounter between the black ghetto and Islam – nationally as well as globally – underline the cosmopolitan qualities of inner-city neighborhoods. Nashashibi concludes one of his academic article by stating that:
What the encounter with Islam has more commonly produced, even for the more nominally practicing, is a repository of terms and practices that render the most stigmatized segments of urban society some of the most tolerant and informed of American citizens when it comes to understanding Islamic practices and embracing Muslim immigrants. For instance, in the course of my interviews I have come across a significant number of men associated with the Blackstone legacy who have traveled to parts of the Muslim world for the Hajj, religious study, or even marriage. Many others have become culturally fluent in the etiquettes, religious symbols, customs, and transnational networks of first and second generation South East Asians and Arab Muslim immigrants. Such discursive knowledge gets infused into the everyday ghetto interactions between those connected to the Blackstones and other Muslims who may happen to work, live or pass through these spaces. It’s this knowledge and corresponding set of practices that are a poignant illustration of ghetto cosmopolitanism at work.

One social phenomenon that Nashashibi frequently returns to in writings is that of hip-hop as an integrated element of cosmopolitan Islam. The “educated or spiritually enlightened thug,” writes Nashashibi in his contribution to Saskia Sassen’s volume on *Deciphering the Global*, “is a motif that resonated deeply among other Muslim rappers (Nashashbi 2007b, 256). Even when Nashashibi’s academic production is overtly academic, there is a clear parallel to his work as a community activist and the subjects and groups that IMAN works among. Both Nashashibi and IMAN interpret Islam a transforming nerve within American inner-city neighborhoods. At the same times people in these neighborhoods, not least artists, are at the forefront examining, developing and expanding Muslim cultural identities. These processes include a move away from a two-fold package of negative “preexisting cultural values”: The destructive cultural elements of inner-cities and exclusive interpretations of Islam.

As a scholar, Nashashibi investigates ghetto cosmopolitanism – as an activist in IMAN his mission is obviously to create strong and persistent backdrops for the rise of such cosmopolitanism. And by playing these roles, he falls within a long and well-established tradition of “scholar-activists” among Muslims in the US (see e.g. Webb 2000): A tradition that is also a part of the educative efforts of Muslim individuals and communities when stating their role as contributing American citizens. Nashashibi’s personal authority as is backed by his studies and degrees at prestigious universities. However, there is little doubt that the studies and academic work that he has carried out has not merely added a superficial icing on the work that he carries out on the Southside of Chicago, but also adds important dimensions to the ideological formulations thereof. These developments were not least visible during my fieldwork in 2012, to which I will now turn my attention.
Much had happened to IMAN in the fifteen year period I had been away from Chicago – and much had happened to the Southwest, Chicago Lawn community. Whereas the Arab American segment was visible and defining in the mid-1990s, the composition of the neighborhood was quite different in 2010. Activists in the neighborhood (both the AACC and IMAN) told me that many of the Arab immigrants who had previously lived in the neighborhood had now moved west and settled in the more well-off Arab communities in Oak Lawn and Bridgeview. Discussing the issue with one of my respondents (working in the AACC), he stated that:

The [Arab] community has moved out of the city to the southwest suburbs. So the community that you probably knew when you volunteered here, many of them have moved out to the suburbs. And that is not necessarily marking any sort of financial upwards movement or financial mobility, as much as the community’s want or desire to get away from the problems of the city, so to speak. And those who had already established themselves in the suburbs were then followed by immigrants who came after them.

Although the Arab immigrants and their families had moved out of the neighborhood, both the AACC and IMAN had decided to stay.

Garbi [following up on the statement why the Arab community had moved to the suburbs]:
So why are you still located here?

Respondent: That is a good question. Part of it is because we are very entrenched in the community here and not just the Arab community. We have very close connections to the Latino and the black community in the area, and our organizing work has to do with that. And part of it is also just history. This place has been a community center for a long, long time. It is hard to let go of that.³

IMAN’s leaving the AACC was gradual. Whereas the organizations after school tutorial program was an integrated part of activities taking place in the AACC in the mid-1990s, by the early 2000s they took place in a church close to the Kedzie/63rd Street headquarters (Karim 2004, 152). In 2006 IMAN moved to its present location at W. 63rd Street and Washtenaw Avenue. Until then IMAN offered free weekend clinic in a local doctor’s office (Maccarron 2006).
The outward-looking activities had increased over the fifteen years that I had been away from the neighborhood. IMAN had, for example, become recognized and an appreciated member of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). SWOP grew out of the Southwest Catholic Organizing Project, established in 1988 by the Catholic parishes in the area and the archdiocesan Office of Peace and Justice (Wedam 2000;127ff). SWOP was established in 1995 as an independent initiative to address racial and cultural inequalities, and quickly altered its Catholic profile to focus on interfaith work (ibid., 128). IMAN’s engagement in SWOP underlines that social, faith based social activism was nothing exceptional, but rather a shared backdrop for a diverse group of community activists on Chicago’s Southwest side. As IMAN’s success and reputation grew, collaboration with other (frequently faith based) organizations became increasingly vital. Although the documentation of IMAN’s activities - speeches, publications and events - underlines the organization’s working on an unshakable ideological reference to Islam, the civic ethics and aspirations of cultural citizenship that IMAN also communicates was and is, to return to one of Rami Nashashibi’s favorite expressions, cosmopolitan.\(^3\) Besides working with SWOP, IMAN collaborates with a
number of other similar community organizations and networks, including the United Congress of Community and Cease Fire.

A second, community oriented aspect of IMANs expanding repertoire of activities was that of supporting and promoting creativity and arts. IMAN’s website at that point in time gave an overview of several so-called community cafes (some of them held outside Chicago – e.g. at the Apollo Theatre of New York). IMAN presents the cafés as events that “allow[s] for community members to utilize the arts as a tool for cross-cultural communication, civic engagement and social change”4 One interviewee, working at IMAN, told me how the focus on arts was something unique: “We provide a space that would otherwise not be there” she said.5 In the same vein another IMAN staff member told me (when I asked him about how the larger Muslim community responded to IMANs promotion of music, not least rap music, that some might see as absolutely irreconcilable with their religion) that:

I think IMAN … has built enough capital in the community. Are there going to be people who will be upset by this, who will have a problem with this [music and rap]? Absolutely yes! But can the community as a whole simply dismiss IMAN as just [inaudible], no, you simply can’t anymore.

These kids are going to listen to something, my kids are going to listen to something. Why can’t it be like that? … There is a lot of talk about Muslim identity, we are obsessed about ‘what is the Muslim identity in the West’ discussion. The words define us. Young people don’t live their identity out through prayers or lectures or dogma. Most healthy normal young people live their identity through culture. And where is that culture going to come from? And if their identity is not going to be based on these empty things and it will be an oppositional identity. There is a need for this [IMAN’s cultural events]. And people are aware of this.

The quote underlines how IMAN had some to see itself (and was seen) by a powerful and defining movement, not only on the Southside of Chicago, but within the Muslim community of the entire city (and even beyond, as IMANs aspiring activities on a national level underline). Based on its authority, IMAN allowed itself to present and promote ideas about a Muslim identity that was (consciously) provocative to more conservative groups of Muslims. IMAN was an alternative, but not – to follow the rationale of the later respondent - a promoter of opposition. Rather, by stressing the element of alternative the respondent, I argue, underlined an important element of IMAN’s role as a civically educating movement, not fighting or challenging the core of citizenship but rather confirming its ethical aspects (with reference to ideas of ideal Muslimness). IMAN presented alternatives to corrosive practices and subcultures in the neighborhood, alternative “halal” rap and cultural events, and alternative routes to cosmopolitan virtues. IMANs activities took their starting point in the conflicts zones of the city, but undoubtedly aspired to be a defining power of Muslimness and not least the cultural citizenship of Muslims both in Chicago and beyond.
And no event was more prominent in promoting these aspirations than Takin’ it to the Streets, which I will describe in the next section of this article.

**Takin’ It to the Streets 2010**

The first Takin’ It to the Streets Festival was held on June 21, 1997. As I have described elsewhere (Schmidt 2004), the festival started out as a reaction against a gang related shooting on the southside of Chicago where two Arab American teenagers were shot dead. Rami Nashashibi was the driving force behind the initial event, emailing the initiate encouragement to volunteer at the event, and leading several of the planning meetings that led up to the festival. The festival took place in Marquette Park, a piece of land in the neighborhood with a significant historical and symbolic value. At least during the festival in 2010 the venue was time and time again stressed as the place where Martin Luther King and his supporters in 1966 protested against racism in the then all-white streets around Marquette park and had bottles, bricks and rocks thrown at them (James 1966).

The 1997 festival was characterized by being quickly and rudimentary organized (the planning took less than six months), and being run on a small budget. Posters were handwritten, and the children’s play area, for example, included many items and games that the IMAN volunteers had simply brought with them from home. The festival organizers had rented some tents, where visitors could find a health clinic, and a stage on which hip-hop artists performed and speakers gave enthusiastic talks. The festival was judged to be a huge success for IMAN, not least as a means to engage the wider community and to give a positive image of Islam: “Through this event we have been able to portray Islam as a religion that advocates justice and condemns any form of oppression, particularly that of victimized residents of the inner-city.” (quoted in Schmidt 2004, 61).

In 2010, the stated ambitions of Takin’ It to the Streets sounded much like the ideas behind the first festival, but the scale of the event had multiplied. I participated as a volunteer both at the day before the festival where stages were set up in Marquette Park, and as a volunteer on the day of the festival. On the morning of the “set-up” day, one of IMANs staff members called all volunteers together and gave a short talk before work started. “This event and space is special,” he said. “Marquette Park was the place where Martin Luther King walked through and gave his speech. At one point, Blacks and Hispanics could not enter the park. They can so today.” The statement points back to IMAN’s wider ideological starting point, where the target of activism was the genealogy of social inequalities of the inner-city, often based on racism.

Arranging a large-scale event as Takin’ It to the Streets on the southwest side of the city, I argue, was based on the history of the festival and the location of IMAN, integrating a
strong, conscious element of public – citizen - education. For one (and as frequently stated by the organizers), the event was intentionally placed in a low-income area with a majority of people who normally had no money to attend music concerts or poetry readings, and might even not have the resources to pay for a bus ticket to bring their families down town for free concerts. Second, the area around Marquette Park was known for a high incident gang related violence – that IMAN was successful in establishing a ceasefire between the struggling parties during the festival was seen as a huge victory (but actually not communicated much publicly), showing that the area also included positive qualities and resources. Thirdly, Marquette Park, a place that under ordinary circumstances was far away from the gaze of middle-class cultural consumers and tourists (normally flocking to the Loop with its museums and theatres) suddenly became the main attraction of the youngsters and families, highlighted as something exceptional, worth consuming and worth giving attention to. The standards for what was worth visiting, what’ the best of Chicago” was about, and what spaces were authoritative for defining the cultural, civil, core of the city, was altered for a short period of time. As noted by a writer on the Chicago Blog a couple of days after the festival:

You can count on a few things at most Chicago festivals. The first is a blocked off portion of a picturesque Chicago neighborhood, suddenly alive in the summertime, with fairly well-off shops and restaurants lining the streets for similarly well-off festival-goers. The second is a somewhat standardized group of alcohol and food vendors, charging fairly elevated prices for beer and burgers/Asian fare/ribs... So when I took the hour-and-a-half trek to Chicago’s Marquette Park neighborhood for the 2010 edition of the Takin’ It to the Streets festival on June 19, imagine my surprise when I encountered a very atypical Chicago summer festival experience. Gone were the beautiful city blocks that festivals usually make their homes in–Marquette Park is by no means one of Chicago’s pretty and gentrified neighborhoods, and the festival itself took place in a muddied grassy park spotted with live graffiti art. Replacing the beer and burgers were healthy smoothies and vegetarian-friendly cuisine, mostly Middle Eastern-influenced [think falafel, hummus, and rice].

(Zecker 2010)

Takin’ It to the Streets was the place to be for Chicagoans on this warm June day. The music program in itself was impressive. Three different stages were placed across the festival area, featuring prominent US artists such as Mos Def and Brother Ali, and international bands including Tinariwen and Orchestre Chabab Al-Andalous. The festival (as illustrated by the quote from Chicago Blog) featured a large food court, and a “faith and justice” tent, where the focus was not on music but on the spoken word: Lectures and workshops. Speakers included Pr. Aminah McCloud (a well-known scholar activist within the Muslim American community), then-mayor of Chicago Richard M. Daley, Rami Nashashibi and other community activists from the Healthy Chicago Lawn Coalition and the United Congress of
Community and Religious Organizations. Further, the festival was a creative laboratory, featuring the creation of Islamic graffiti art by an English graffiti artist. Religion – Islam – was a constant, both casual yet exposed element of the festival. Exposed, as when you passed the payer tent with its metallic crescent ornaments, red, open walls, and high, white balcony roof. And casual, when speakers referred to the example of the Prophet Muhammad, and when Mos Def took the main stage, greeting people by singing “As-Salam Alaikum” to which the audience responded again and again “wa alaikum as-Salam” (or by simply repeating Mos Def’s singing, see Youtube 2010).

Takin’ it to the Streets 2010 was a cultural festival, but undoubtedly a festival with the ambition to accomplish more than entertaining the 10-20,000 people that turned up in Marquette Park. The event included aspects that were highly identity-political and educative, building on IMAN’s interpretations of Islam and cosmopolitanism. Firstly, IMAN could, through Takin’ It to the Streets, showed Muslims as contributing, civically involved citizens of the city. Although the festival only lasted a day, a Muslim organization could show off its
success in doing what both the city government stated as their ambition but had few tools to accomplish: Of making Chicago (or a part of it) a city for all, of (temporarily) setting some of the factors that tore the city apart on halt: racisim, social inequality and gang violence. Second, while Streets 2010 was a means to educate non-Muslim citizens of Chicago about the cultural citizenship of their Muslim neighbors, the festival was also a forceful means to advocate IMAN’s interpretation of a Muslim citizen ethics among their fellow believers: Muslims were to take active roles in society, fighting inequality and injustice locally and internationally. Thirdly, Islam as culture was both universal and locally based and flavored. Islam on the southwest side of Chicago welcomed and supported rap music - played loud and with people moving their bodies in a mixed audience - and street art. Islam in the urban ghetto was also about cosmopolitanism from below; involvement a refinement of elements that were easily interpreted as decadent and low-class, but here refined to a cultural resource that people travelled across the city to experience. Thirdly, while Streets 2010 was definitely a showcase of claims to cultural citizenship by a group of Muslims and the social strength of a Muslim organization, the event also underlined IMAN’s recognition that alliances with likeminded outside the Muslim community was an imperative if the organizations should reach its goals. Takin’ It to Streets can in many ways be interpreted as an - intended - microcosmic image of the city, of its contrasts and “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005). Streets 2010 was, as illustrated when Rami Nashashibi gave a brief talk in the Faith and Justice tent during a session dealing with “unity for change: Celebrating the grassroots human rights movement”:

You have heard young people who are completely committed and devoted to the idea that communities of color can no longer be divided and that we can no longer simply settle for hearing about one another from either the media or the dinner or dining room table. It is not enough. Even in our own communities we have to do the difficult and sometimes very unattractive and painful work of stepping out of our comfort zones and hearing and listening to one another, hearing each others’ stories and connecting to one other and realizing to others’ shared vision; a shared agenda, and a shared future for how we shape not only the future of the America but also, as I have always believed, the future of the world.6
Discussion

Among my respondents there was a general impression that IMAN was unique. And there is little doubt that the work of IMAN was impressive and acknowledged in the city and neighborhood where the organization was established. However, IMAN as an example also point to more general, perhaps banal elements of diversified conviviality and aspirations for the accomplishment of citizenship. Citizenship is, on one hand, a passport and a set of rights and plights, but as I pointed out in the introduction, citizenship is also normative and a core of (translucid, yet definitely there) ethics. Besides, cultural citizenship implies hierachization, frequently along the lines of majority and minority.

IMAN reversed this hierarchical order, exactly though the organization’s stressing the ethics of citizenship. Citizenship, as both exemplified through the everyday activities of the movement and the exceptional event of Takin’ It to the Streets, challenged generally
acknowledged social injustices and inequalities, and further educated the city of Chicago’s citizens about the positive content of one of the city’s least attractive neighborhoods. Whether the narrative was always rosy is something that at least my first, in depth fieldwork challenged. However, the ethical aspect of activism, ghetto cosmopolitanism and civic engagement was something that IMAN communicated again and again; these elements were a part of the brand. Just as national citizenships across the world are brands and narratives.

Was the aspect of religion neglected in this process? The answer is no. Islam was and is an indisputable, motivating element of IMAN’s ideological baggage and activism. However, by engaging the communities, the social ills and resources of the inner city, and even aspiring towards a national break through, IMAN not only modifies ideas about the qualities and core of American citizenship, but also the qualities and core of Islamic values and what it means to be a Muslim. In that sense the citizenship education that IMAN stands for was and is bifocal, addressing both majority and minority ideals and claiming to fulfill the essence of both.

Is such activism particularly American, or can similar trends be found in other parts of the world, where Islam is affiliated with immigration and minority status, e.g. Northern Europe? Bases on my own research in both contexts’ the answer is a clear yes-and-no. IMAN’s focus on promoting an alternative, yet recognizable ethical image of Islam and the active social engagement of Muslim citizens is indeed something that you see outside the US (Schmidt 2012a; Jeldtoft 2012). Also, using urban spaces for such manifestations, e.g. through processions or demonstrations is a repeated phenomenon within the identity political repertoire of Muslim immigrant minorities in Northern Europe (e.g. Werbner 1996, Schmidt 2012b). And while the event of September 11 2001 has had dire implications for Muslims in the United States, the event has increased Islamophobic sentiments in Europe too, pushing Muslim activists to either increase their focus on Islam as a pathway to (inclusive, ideal) ethical citizenship or an increased focus on Muslim identity as contrasting and even opposing citizenship as formulated by Western nation states. In Northern Europe, as is the case in the US, Muslimness is domesticated via trends of “exotic consumption” and “boutique multiculturalism” (Fish 1997, 378), exposed and devoured at cultural festivals and markets (see e.g. Schmidt 2013; Schmidt 2015).

However, I will argue that aspects of IMAN’s active role in Chicago and the Takin’ It to the Streets Festival are specific to Muslim Activism in the United States. First, IMAN’s role as a provider of welfare in the form of a health clinic and food drives can be seen as a result of the – compared to e.g. Scandinavian countries – weak American welfare state. Second, although there is a noticeable skepticism against Islam and Muslims within the American public, using religion as a backdrop for social and cultural activism and as a springboard for coalition making with social actors on both neighborhood, urban and national levels is perceived as socially acceptable strategies for civic engagement. In the United States,
“religion is the social category with clearest meaning and acceptance,” and religious viewpoints in the United States are not merely secularized and private, but also political and public. To be a dedicated religious practitioner in the Weberian sense is also to be a good American, and thus a means to fulfill (parts of) the ethics of citizenship. Having a large audience sing “as-salaam alaikum” and a city show strong moral and financial support of an event organized by a religious association would, for example, be unheard of in Denmark. Whereas religion is seen and appraised as a positive social, political – and public - force in the United States, religion in North European countries is associated with – and assigned to - the private sphere. In this comparative light the uniqueness of IMAN shows itself as a result of small-scale community entrepreneurism, religious ideals and large-scale, national social norms: A mix unimaginable to Muslim minorities in Northern Europe.

References


TV/radio interviews


End notes

1 Cabrini Green was a public housing development project on the near north side of Chicago. The project was known for its poverty and high crime rate.

2 Interview (taped), June 26 2010.

3 For a recent example of IMANs involvement in SWOP and the rhetoric adapted, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QC7u4wto0Ck.

4 IMAN webite (http://www.imancentral.org/),

5 Interview (not taped), June 15, 2010.

6 Taped by author.

7 I have carried out fieldwork among Muslim communities in the following US cities: Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington DC. In Europe I have carried out fieldwork in Muslim communities in Copenhagen (Denmark) and Uppsala (Sweden).

Although Weber mainly discusses the relationship of ethics, religious affiliation and personal (economic and social) credibility in relation to Protestant sects (Weber 1970), much of the same tendency can be said to characterize affiliation of acknowledged communities of faith in the United States.