ISLAM
in Cuba
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Mohammed Dawud is 28 yo. His name once was Raul Maimo Lasa. His grandfather was a Muslim from Jordan while his father, a soldier in the Cuban Army, a Christian. Her mother, a dentist, is a descendant of African slaves. He stopped his studies at 12, and started a life at the border of society: he spent more than ten years living on frauds and thefts, getting prostitutes for tourists and being on drugs all the time. Before becoming a Muslim he joined a Masonic lodge and also became an important member of a satanic cult. He met Islam through a Californian imam visiting Cuba, and the subsequent meetings with the Pakistani community led him eventually to his conversion. In 2013 he went to study Theology in New Delhi, India and in Dhaka, Bangladesh

According to a recent, yet unofficial, survey, the Cuban Muslim community should count around 4,000 people, most of them converted in recent years. Raul Castro's government is in fact more flexible not just in terms of diplomatic and trade relations, but also in terms of freedom of belief. This resulted in a smoother approach to religions.

The Islamic enclave in Cuba has recently grown bigger in terms of new conversions, even if many of them, especially among women, occurred to comply with the Islamic precept which forbids Muslims to marry non-Muslim women – so it's not always a choice of faith.

In July 2015, in Havana Vieja, where once was an automobile museum, a mosque where Cuban Muslims could pray was finally built.

There's someone, like Turkish President Erdogan, arguing Islam arrived on the island well before Christopher Columbus: fascinating thesis, but almost impossible to prove. Islam began to be present in Cuba during the 70s and 80s of last century, while a real diffusion occurred between the late 90s and the beginning of the new millennium with the arrival of Pakistani and Yemeni students reaching Cuba to study after some agreements between the Cuban government and several Middle East countries. Many Cubans were attracted by the sense of brotherhood they could sense in the Islamic students' communities, as locals are always trying to escape a frustrating fate or (and) a borderline life. Like other religions do, Islam grew up and spread among the poorest, those who see religious practices as a social redemption, a chance to be part of a community very different from the socialist one, whose values aren't shared by the majority of the Cuban population anymore.

A latent islamophobia exists, in Cuba, and sometimes it produces discrimination against Muslims. After their conversion to Islam, some Cubans have even lost their jobs, and obviously the reasons given for those layoffs hide the true motivations. But the Islam world keeps growing even under the Caribbean palm trees.

Ali Hamadsi on the Malecon, in Habana Vieja. Ali is a Muslim from a few years, is a musician and a former rapper, and share his flat with other two Muslim persons

Irania Les Calles Osorio, now Aisha. She was born and raised in the house where she lives now, in Habana Vieja. She's a nurse but she's not working, and considering the poor salary she prefers to stay home, in the end. Her husband Abdul, formerly Boris Baraca Romay, studied at the conservatory and plays medieval music. Both went to catholic schools, converted three years ago and got married the very same day they became Muslim. Among their dreams: to have a child, visit Mecca and travel in Muslim countries

Dawud in a suburb of Havana in front of a murale representing Che Guevara. His gesture with the index finger up means “Allah is one”

Muhammed Ali, once Roel Arsi Sambra, Sinfuego. He works in a "finca" (a farm) but also sells chickens he's raising at the Sinfuego market. Before becoming a Muslim he wanted to become a priest, and spent some time as a preseminarian in Sinfuego cathedral

Marian Ali with her daughter Amina in the house in Santa Clara where she lives with her husband Muhammed Alì, a labourer after several years working in a hospital. Marian is 30 yo, with her husband has two children and both finished their high school

Musa, aka Rafael Garcia, with his daughter Misja and his nephews. He's 62 yo and lives in Jovellano, a little country town not far from Varadero. He collects old things to recycle made of aluminium, paper, wood and sell them to the state. To do this job, he pays for the permit 80 Cuban pesos. His earnings are around 300 pesos per month, the equivalent of 12 USD. He's a Muslim from a year, and converted after meeting some Pakistani students in Cuba for studying. He felt fascinated by the brotherhood he sensed among those students: a feeling he didn't find in Cuban society

Rafiq Ali, aka Maikel Hernandea, is 33 yo, lives in Santa Clara and is “back” to Islam from three years. He’s from a family of catholic tradition, but he felt like missing a sentiment of “love” that he found only in the Islamic community. He’s the second tenor of the Santa Clara choir, and sings classical and contemporary music

Dawud making his ritual ablutions before praying in the “musalla” of Muhammed Isa in Cruce

Amina Ali in the garden of the house of Santa Clara where she lives with her family

Sunset pray in a garden of Havana

Yahya, formerly known as Juan Enrique Gler, was born in Camaguey where he still lives. He was an high school history teacher, now is retired and have to work as a shoeshine to live: he earns 5 pesos (0.20 USD) for every pair of shoes he works on

Hassan Jan and his son at the Che Guevara Mausoleum in Santa Clara. Hassan, once Froilan Reyes, is 43 yo and is married to Shavana, converted after him. They have two children: Ismael, 12, and Aina, 16, both students. He has been a sound technician at the university of Santa Clara, but after his conversion he has been more and more marginalised until he lost his job. Discrimination against Muslims in Cuba is quite real, but officially there's nothing against them. Even Hassan met Islam after an encounter with some Pakistani student. He now runs a printing business through his PC and trades in electronics, garments, shoes and whatever happens to be available

Suleyman Airam and Amid Hamza greets
in the "musalla" built by Amid

Nehad works as Commercial Finance Manager in Dubai's Johnson & Johnson. A global citizen passionate about tackling social inequalities, Nehad is an active volunteer both locally and globally. She has worked with multiple non-profit organizations, small businesses and budding female entrepreneurs all around Africa providing valuable consulting services to drive sustainable growth

Abdullah, born Yohenni, 30 yo. Both his parents died committing suicide: his father when he was seven years old, her mother the day of her twentieth birthday. He tried to kill himself too. Like many others, he was living a desperate life among crime and drug addiction before embracing Islam, which saved him. Abdullah is unemployed, even if he's a baker, but he's available for any job. He's married with a woman 30 years older than him. Abdullah's passion is writing: he writes poetry and novels. He finished sixteen of them, but didn't publish any: it looks like it's impossible, in Cuba. He want to write a novel focused on Islam precepts