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ISLAM IN ASIA: PEOPLE, PRACTICES, TRADITIONS

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WEEK 4

Ethnic diversity among China's Muslims

Many Americans' curiosity about Islam began only after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and the vast majority perceive Muslims as a homogeneous and monolithic group. However, numbering approximately 1.5 billion — nearly one-fourth of the world's population — Muslims are a very diverse community living all over the globe, including in China. China's 2010 census indicated it has a total population of 1.34 billion, making it the most populous country in the world. It is also a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious country with a much more significant Muslim population than most people realize.

According to its 2010 census, China officially recognizes 56 distinct ethnic groups, the largest being the Han Chinese, who constitute 91.51 percent of the total population. The 55 ethnic minorities, at 113.8 million, constitute 8.49 percent of China's population. Among the ethnic minorities, 20 million are Muslims, who comprise a culturally and ethnically diverse population. The 10 officially identified ethnic Muslim minority groups are Hui (9.2 million), Uyghur (8.6 million), Kazak (1.3 million), Dongxiang (400,000), Kirgiz (171,000), Salar (90,000), Tajik (41,000), Uzbek (14,000), Bonan (13,000) and Tatar (5,000).

Islam came to China during the earliest phases of its development in the second half of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries. Since then, Islam has been dispersed all over China and has interacted with other religious practices and societies. For Muslims all over China, Islam is a faith that inspires personal piety and provides meaning and guidance for their everyday life. It's also an important identity marker of their ethnicity and culture. Yet there is linguistic and geographic diversity among the Muslim communities in China.

The most populous of the 10 Muslim ethnic minorities are Hui, also known as Tungan, who are also the most geographically dispersed group. They live in every region of China, with the highest concentrations in Ningxia,

as well as significant populations throughout Yunnan province in southwest China and Henan province in central China. The ethnic identity of the Hui is mainly constituted by their religion since they have assimilated linguistically and culturally with the Han Chinese. They do not have their own language; they mainly speak Chinese.

China's Turkic-speaking Muslims — including Uyghur, Kazak, Kirgiz, Salar, Uzbek and Tatar — as well as the Iranian-speaking Tajik are concentrated in the northwest provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu and Qinghai. Uyghur, Kazak and other Muslims in Xinjiang share much in common culturally and linguistically with the people on the other sides of the Chinese border, in Central Asia. The Mongolic-speaking Muslim groups Dongxiang and Bonan live in Gansu province.

Since 1949, China has been ruled by an atheistic Communist Party, yet its constitution guarantees the right to free religious belief. Despite this provision, the Hui have, comparatively speaking, a broader degree of religious freedom than the Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, especially the Uyghur. The Chinese government faces challenges in Xinjiang because of the province's strategic location, the tension between autonomy and loyalty related to religion, and the tension between members of indigenous Muslims and newly arrived Han Chinese.

Within the context of world politics, Islam has become more prominent. The Chinese government is concerned about the rise of Islamic revivalism in many parts of the world, especially in the strategic border area, and has conflated the practice of Islam with separatist activity. The government believes that most religious practices, especially Islamic activities, are a threat to the state because of their impact on foreign affairs and international relations.



In Xinjiang, the government tightly controls all forms of religious practices, Islamic education and even cultural activities, so Muslims are living under severe political and religious government controls. They face daunting challenges to maintain their cultural and ethnic identity, inseparable from Islamic tradition. For China's Muslims, Islam is both a faith and a way of life, and they believe that preserving Islamic traditions and values is essential to any success they will have in strengthening their ethnic identity and their culture.

Next week:

Islam in Java: A powerful presence

Photo: Id Kah mosque in China's city of Kashgar, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Photographed November 23, 2005, by unknown. Wikipedia Commons.