

'Here you don't know what will solve a problem. It's about looking for a key.'

Sheikh Reda Shata, the imam of a thriving mosque in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn



James Estrlin/The New York Times

A Muslim Leader in Brooklyn, Reconciling 2 Worlds

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

The imam begins his trek before dawn, his long robe billowing like a ghost through empty streets. In this dark, quiet hour, his thoughts sometimes drift back to the Egyptian farming village where he was born.

But as the sun rises over Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, Sheikh Reda Shata's new world comes to life. The R train rattles beneath a littered stretch of sidewalk, where Mexican workers huddle in the cold. An electric Santa dances in a doughnut shop window. Neon signs beckon Cypriot cabs blare their horns.

The imam slips into a plain brick building, nothing like the golden-domed mosque of his youth. He stops to pray, and then climbs the cracked linoleum steps to his cluttered office. The answering machine blinks frantically, a portent of the endless questions to come.

A teenage girl wants to know: Is it halal, or lawful, to eat a Big Mac? Can alcohol be served, a watter wanderer, if it is prohibited by the Koran? Is it wrong to take out a mortgage, young Muslim professionals ask, when Islam frowns upon monetary interests?

The questions are only a piece of the del-

AN IMAM IN AMERICA

First of three articles: Old Values in a New Land

puzzle Mr. Shata must solve as the imam of the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, a thriving New York mosque where several thousand Muslims worship.

To his congregants, Mr. Shata is far more than the leader of daily prayers and giver of the Friday sermon. Many of them now live in a land without their parents, who typically assist with finding a spouse. There are fewer uncles and cousins to help resolve personal disputes. There is no local House of Fa-tawa to issue rulings on ethical questions.

Sheikh Reda, as he is called, arrived in Brooklyn one year after Sept. 11. Virtually overnight, he became an Islamic judge and nursery school principal, a matchmaker and marriage counselor, a 24-hour hot line on all things Islamic.

Day after day, he must find ways to rec-

oncle Muslim tradition with American life. Little in his rural Egyptian upbringing or years of Islamic scholarship prepared him for the challenge of leading a mosque in America.

The job has worn him down and opened his mind. It has landed him, exhausted, in the hospital and earned him a following far beyond Brooklyn.

"America transformed me from a person of rigidity to flexibility," said Mr. Shata, speaking through an Arabic translator. "I went from a country where a sheikh would speak and the people listened to one where the sheikh talks and the people talk back."

This is the story of Mr. Shata's journey west: the making of an American imam. Over the last half-century, the Muslim population in the United States has risen significantly. Immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa have settled across the country, establishing mosques from Boston to Los Angeles, and turning Islam into one of the nation's fastest growing religions. By some estimates, as many as six million Muslims

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Army Ordered To Look Again At Battle Death

Criminal Inquiry Set in Killing of N.F.L. Star

By MONICA DAVEY and ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON, March 4 — In a rare rebuke of military investigators, the Defense Department inspector general has told the Army to open a criminal inquiry into the shooting death of Cpl. Pat Tillman, the former professional football player whose mistreatment in the Army drew national attention, Pentagon officials said Saturday.

The new inquiry into the killing of Corporal Tillman, a member of the elite Rangers, will be conducted by the Army Criminal Investigation Command. The Army initially had said he died as a hero in a blaze of enemy fire in Afghanistan in 2004 before attributing his death to an accidental shooting by

three other Rangers. The new inquiry follows three other military investigations — two by his Army Ranger superior officers and one by its parent organization, the United States Army Special Operations Command — that the inspector general's office has now determined were deficient.

The earlier investigations found a series of crucial errors made by Corporal Tillman's fellow Rangers in the heat of combat, but found no criminal wrongdoing.

The new inquiry would be the first criminal investigation into Corporal Tillman's death, a move that military law experts said was unusual and significant.

"It obviously could lead to one of three things," said Eugene Fidell, a former military lawyer at the Washington College of Law at American University. "Was there a negligence homicide? Was there a dereliction of duty? Was there a cover-up?"

Pentagon officials said no new evidence had prompted the inquiry and would not speculate about the outcome or timing. But the officials said that given the confusion on a battlefield, it would be highly unusual to pursue criminal charges against a soldier for the death of a comrade. Col. Joseph Curtin, an Army spokesman, said that the scope of the new inquiry had yet to be defined but that investigators would look at whether the soldiers violated military law when they failed to identify their targets before opening fire on his post.

Corporal Tillman's parents, who were notified Friday of the investigation, have long complained about the

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BUSH RULES OUT A NUCLEAR DEAL WITH PAKISTANIS

CONTRAST TO INDIAN PACT

A Call for More Democracy and a Frank Talk About Fighting Terrorism

By ELISABETH BUMILLER and CARLOTTA GALL

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, March 4 — President Bush made clear on Saturday that Pakistan should not expect a civilian nuclear agreement like the one with India soon, and he bluntly said the two rivals on the subcontinent should not be compared to each other.

Mr. Bush said he and Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, had discussed a civilian nuclear program for Pakistan during talks on Saturday morning.

"I explained that Pakistan and India are different countries with different needs and different histories," Mr. Bush said at a joint outdoor news conference with Mr. Musharraf on the grounds of the presidential palace. Always-e-Sadr, "So we are proceeding forward, our strategy will take in effect those well-known differences."

Before Mr. Bush's remarks, administration officials said General Musharraf had no chance of making such a deal when proliferation and terrorism remained concerns in Pakistan. But it was striking that the president spoke so directly as his host stood at his side.

Mr. Bush showed strong support for Mr. Musharraf's efforts to combat militants, even though Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, and Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader, were believed to still be hiding in Pakistan. Without being specific, General Musharraf himself made reference to "sharpp" in the past.

Mr. Bush said, "Part of my mission today was to determine whether or not the president is as committed as he has been in the past to pursuing these terrorists to justice, and he is."

The Pakistani foreign minister, Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, made clear that the Pakistani government had a frank discussion, saying General Musharraf had made a "comprehensive and telling response" to American concerns about Pakistan's commitment to fighting terrorism.

"They had a level of discussion I had not seen before," he said, adding that General Musharraf shared intelligence and documentary evidence with Mr. Bush.

Pakistan had had to deal with 30,000 foreign fighters returning through from Afghanistan over the years, Mr. Kasuri said, had more troops in the border areas than for-

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To Democrats Hungry for Senate, A Pennsylvania Seat Looks Ripe

By ROBIN TONER

BETHLEHEM, Pa. — Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, the third-ranking Republican in the Senate leadership, sums up his race for reelection this year with a paradoxical pride: "The other side of the aisle wants to beat me more than anything you can possibly imagine."

In a campaign that the Greater Lehigh Valley Auto Dealers Association not long ago called "Mr. Santorum is almost certainly right. No other race in the nation has so focused the nation's attention on the party's energy, resources or raw hunger to return to power on Capitol Hill. No other race so captures the Republican Party's vulnerability in this year, with some public opinion polls consistently showing Mr. Santorum trailing his Democratic opponent, State Treasurer Bob Casey Jr.

Mr. Santorum, 47, has been a brass symbol of the conservative ascendancy since his election to the Senate in 1994, leading the charge on issues like the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act and the partial privatization of Social Security — enraging liberals all the while. He says he relishes a come-from-behind fight against Mr. Casey, but acknowledges that "it's not easy being me" in the current political climate, a president whose approval ratings are stuck in the 30's.

Mr. Casey, 45, is an experienced state legislator, the son of a popular former governor, and in some

ways the symbol of a new pragmatism in the Democratic Party. National party leaders heavily recruited Mr. Casey to enter this race, despite his long opposition to abortion rights, because, quite simply, they thought he could win.

In an increasingly older, economically anxious state, Mr. Casey is casting Mr. Santorum as a "rubber stamp" for Bush's tax-cut legislation, citing budget cuts on education and Medicare, tax breaks for the rich and the substantial and growing deficits. "We're on the wrong road," he said.

This is a big race — expected to cost more than \$50 million and to attract strategists and advocacy groups from around the country. It is also expected to join the likes of marquee Senate campaigns like Jim Hunt vs. Jesse Helms in North Carolina in 1984, or more recently, John Thune vs. Tom Daschle, then the Democratic leader, in South Dakota in 2004.

Mr. Santorum, in fact, tells his audiences that Democrats consider this "the revenge of Tom Daschle race." The Democrats need a net gain of six seats to recapture the Senate, and this is one of their best shots at a pickup.

When the race is over, Pennsylvania, a quintessential swing state in national politics, could also help se-

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As Speed Brews, Iran Hits Bumps on Atomic Path

By WILLIAM J. BROAD and DAVID E. SANGER

When Iran defiantly cut the locks and seals on its nuclear enrichment plants in January and restarted its effort to manufacture atomic fuel, it forced the world to confront a momentous question: How long will it be before Tehran has the ability to produce a bomb that would alter the balance of power in the Middle East?

Iran's claims that it is racing forward with enrichment have created an air of crisis as the board of the International Atomic Energy Agency prepares to meet tomorrow in Vienna before the United Nations Security Council takes up the Iran file for possible penalties.

Yet behind the sense of immediate

alarm lies a more complex picture of Iran's nuclear potential. Interviews with many of the world's leading nuclear analysts and a review of technical assessments show that Iran continues to wrestle with serious problems that have slowed its nuclear ambitions for more than two dec-

ades. Obstacles, the experts say, remain at virtually every step on the atomic road. The most significant, they add, involve the two most technically challenging aspects of the process — converting uranium ore to a toxic gas and, especially, spinning that gas into enriched atomic fuel.

According to the analysts, the Iranians need to do repairs and build new machines at a prototype plant before they can begin enriching even modest quantities of uranium. And

then, for a decade, they would have to mass produce 100 centrifuges a week to fill the cavernous industrial enrichment halls at Natanz. What is more, he gas meant to feed those machines is plagued by impurities.

The perception gap was underscored in February when Tehran announced a stark warning: By late this year, Iranian officials said, they would begin installing nearly 3,000 centrifuges at the giant Natanz plant, buried deep underground to withstand attack. That many centrifuges, international inspectors knew, could make up for 10 to 12 nuclear warheads every year.

In Washington and Europe, the announcement was dismissed as an empty boast. "Maybe they can move

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Hey Neighbor, Stop Piggybacking on My Wireless

By MICHEL MARRIOTT

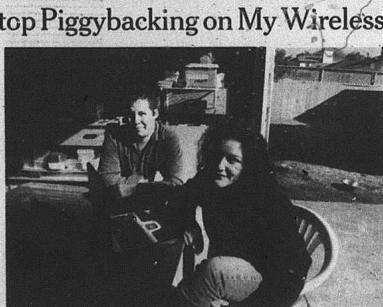
For a while, the wireless Internet connection Christine and Randy Brodeur installed last year seemed perfect. They were able to sit in their sunny Los Angeles backyard working on their laptop computers.

But they soon began noticing that their high-speed Internet access had become as slow as rush-hour traffic on the 405 freeway.

"I didn't know whether to blame it on the Santa Ana winds or what," recalled Mrs. Brodeur, the chief executive of Socket Media, a marketing and public relations agency.

The "what" turned out to be neighbors who had tapped into their system. The additional online traffic nearly choked out the Brodeurs, who pay a \$40 monthly fee for their Internet service, slowing their access until it was practically unusable.

Piggybacking, the usually unauthorized tapping into someone else's wireless Internet connection, is no longer the exclusive domain of pilfering computer geeks or shady hackers cruising for unguarded networks.



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Christine and Randy Brodeur of Los Angeles confronted neighbors after discovering that extra users had slowed their wireless Internet access.

Ordinarily understanding people are tapping in. As they do, new sets of internet behaviors are creeping into America's popular culture.

"I don't think it's stealing," said Edwin Caroso, a 21-year-old student at Miami Dade College, echoing an often-heard sentiment.

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Schools Avoid Ranking, Vexing Some Colleges

Thousands of high schools have stopped giving students' class rankings to colleges, saying they could harm students' admissions chances. But some colleges are saying that strategy can backfire.

Pro-Israel Group Roiled

The annual gathering of the nation's top pro-Israel lobbying group is clouded by the prosecution of two of the group's former officials on charges of receiving classified information about terrorism.

Real Estate, the Obsession

A special issue of the magazine examines the preoccupation with buying, selling or just talking about real estate, including the story of a 400-year-old house and what it says about today's market.

Still Earning From Elvis

Is there still life left in the Elvis brand? An entrepreneur who paid \$100 million for rights to Elvis Presley's name and image seems to think so.

AT&T Near BellSouth Deal

AT&T is expected to announce a deal to buy BellSouth, the country's third largest phone company, for \$65 billion.

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Updated news nytimes.com



Faith and Improvisation

In the subway, Sheikh Reda Shata wears Western clothes instead of his traditional robe to avoid being targeted.

A Muslim Leader in Brooklyn, Reconciling Two Worlds

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now live in America.

Leading this flock calls for improvisation. Imams must unify diverse congregations with often-clashing Islamic traditions. They must grapple with the threat of terrorism, answering to law enforcement agents without losing the trust of their fellow Muslims. Sometimes they must set aside conservative beliefs that prevail in the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam.

Islam is a legalistic faith. Muslims believe in a divine law that guides their daily lives, including what they should eat, drink and wear. In countries where the religion reigns, this is largely the accepted way.

But in the West, what Islamic law prohibits is everywhere. Alcohol fills chocolate. Women jog in sports bras. For many Muslims in America, life is a daily clash between Islamic mores and material temptation. At the center of this clash stands the imam.

In America, imams evoke a simplistic caricature—of robed, bearded clerics issuing fatwas in foreign lands. Hundreds of imams live in the United States, but their portrait remains flatly one-dimensional. Either they are symbols of diversity, breaking the Ramadan fast with smiling politicians, or zealous, hurrying into their storefront mosques.

Mr. Shata, 37, is neither firebrand nor a ready advocate of progressive Islam. Some of his views would offend conservative Muslims, other beliefs would repel American liberals. He is in many ways a work in progress, mapping his own middle ground between two different worlds.

The imam's cramped, curtained office can hardly contain the dramas that unfold inside. Women cry. Husbands storm off. Friendships end. Every day brings soap opera plots and pitch.

A Moroccan woman falls to her knees near the imam's Hewlett-Packard printer. "Have mercy on me!" she wails to a friend who has accused her of theft. Another day, it is a man whose Lebanese wife has concealed their marriage and newborn son from her strict father. "I will tell him everything," the husband screams.

Mr. Shata settles dowries, confronts wife abusers, brokers business deals and tries to arrange marriages. He approaches each problem with an almost scientific certainty that it can be solved. "I try to be more of a doctor than a judge," said Mr. Shata. "A judge sentences. A doctor tries to remedy."

Imams in the United States now serve an estimated 1,200 mosques. Some of their congregations have lived here for generations, assimilating socially and succeeding professionally. But others are recent immigrants, still struggling to find their place in America. Demographers expect their numbers to rise in the coming decades, possibly surpassing those of American Jews.

Like many of their faithful, most imams in the United States come from abroad. They are recruited primarily for their knowledge of the Koran and the language in which it was revealed, Arabic.

But few are prepared for the test that awaits. Like the parish priests who came generations before, imams are called on to lead a community on the margins of American civic life. They are conduits to and arbiters of an exhilarating, if sometimes hostile world, filled with promise and peril.

An Invitation to Islam

More than 5,000 miles lie between Brooklyn and Kafra al Battikh, Mr. Shata's birthplace in northeastern Egypt. Situated where the Nile Delta meets the Suez Canal, it was a village of dirt roads and watermelon vines when Mr. Shata was born in 1968.

Egypt was in the throes of change. The country had just suffered a staggering defeat in the Six Day War with Israel, and protests against the government followed. Hoping to counter growing radicalism, a new president, Anwar Sadat, allowed a long-repressed Islamic movement to flourish.

"The son of a farmer and fertilizer salesman, Mr. Shata belonged to the lowest rung

of Egypt's rural middle class. His house had no electricity. He did not see a television until he was 15.

Islam came to him softly, in the rhythms of his grandmother's voice. At bedtime, she would tell him the story of the Prophet Muhammad, the seventh-century founder of Islam. The boy heard much that was familiar. Like the prophet, he had lost his mother at a young age.

"She told me the same story maybe a thousand times," he said.

At the age of 5, he began memorizing the Koran. Like thousands of children in the Egyptian countryside, he attended a Sunni religious school subsidized by the government and connected to Al Azhar University, a bastion of Islamic scholarship.

Too poor to buy books, the young Mr. Shata hand-copied from hundreds at the town library. The bound volumes now line the shelves of his Bay Ridge apartment. When he graduated, he enrolled at Al Azhar and headed to Cairo by train. There, he sat on a bench for hours, marveling at the sights.

"It was like a lost child," he said. "Cars. We didn't have them. People of different colors. Foreigners. Women almost naked. It was like an imaginary world."

At 18, Mr. Shata thought of becoming a judge. But at his father's urging, he joined the college of imams, the Dawah.

The word means invitation. It refers to the duty of Muslims to invite, or call, others to the faith. Unlike Catholicism or Judaism, Islam has no ordained clergy. The Prophet Muhammad was the religion's first imam, or prayer leader. Islam's closest corollary to a rabbi or priest, schools like the Dawah are its version of a seminary or rabbiniate.

After four years, Mr. Shata graduated with honors, seventh in a class of 3,400. The next decade brought lessons in adaptation. In need of money, Mr. Shata took a job teaching sharia, or Islamic law, to children in Saudi Arabia, a country guided by Wahabism, a puritan strain of Sunni Islam. He found his Saudi colleagues' interpretation of the Koran overly literal at times, and the treatment of women, who were not allowed to vote or drive, troubling.

Five years later, he returned to a different form of religious control in Egypt, where most imams are appointed by the government and monitored for signs of radicalism or political dissent.

"They are not allowed to deviate from the official text that the government sets for them," said Khalid Abou El Fadl, an Egyptian law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Mr. Shata craved greater independence, and opened a furniture business. But he missed the life of dawah and eventually returned to it as the imam of his hometown mosque, which drew 4,000 worshippers on Fridays alone.

His duties were clear: He led the five daily prayers and delivered the khutba, or Friday sermon. His mosque, like most in Egypt, was financed and managed by the government. He spent his free time giving lectures, conducting marriage ceremonies and offering occasional religious guidance.

In 2000, Mr. Shata led to work as an imam in the gritty industrial city of Stuttgart, Germany. Europe brought a fresh new freedom. "I saw a wider world," he said. "Anyone with an opinion could express it."

Then came Sept. 11.

Soon after, Mr. Shata's mosque was defiled with graffiti and smeared with feces. The next summer, Mr. Shata took a call from an imam in Brooklyn. The man, Mohamed Moussa, was leaving his mosque, exhausted by the troubles of congregants following the terrorist attacks. The mosque was looking for a replacement, and Mr. Shata had been highly recommended by a professor at Al Azhar.

Most imams are recruited to American mosques on the recommendation of other imams or trusted scholars abroad, and are usually offered an annual contract. Some include health benefits and subsidized housing; others are painfully sparse. The pay can range from \$20,000 to \$50,000.

Mr. Shata had heard stories of Muslim hardship in America. The salary at the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge was less than

what he was earning in Germany. But foremost on his mind were his wife and three small daughters, whom he had not seen in months. Germany had refused them entry.

He agreed to take the job if he could bring his family to America. In October 2002, the American Embassy in Cairo granted visas to the Shatas and they boarded a plane for New York.

A Mosque, a Magnet

A facade of plain white brick rises up from Fifth Avenue just south of 88th Street in Bay Ridge. Two sets of words, one in Arabic and another in English, announce the mosque's dual identity from a marquee above its gray metal doors.

To the mosque's base — Palestinian, Egyptian, Yemeni, Moroccan and Algerian immigrants — it is known as Masjid Moussa, named after one of the prophet's companions, Moussa ibn Omar. To the mosque's English-speaking neighbors, descendants of the Italians, Irish and Norwegians who once filled the neighborhood, it is the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge.

Mosques across America are commonly named centers of societies, in part because they provide so many services. Some 140 mosques serve New York City, where an estimated 600,000 Muslims live, roughly 20 percent of them African-American, said Louis Abdelatif Cristillo, an anthropologist at Teachers College who has canvassed the city's mosques.

The Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, like other American mosques, is run by a board of directors, mostly Muslim professionals from the Palestinian territories. What began in 1984—a small storefront on Bay Ridge Avenue, with no name and no imam, has grown into one of the city's vital Muslim centers, a magnet for new immigrants.

Its four floors pulse with life: a nursery school, an Islamic bookstore, Koran classes and daily lectures. Some 1,500 Muslims worship at the mosque on Fridays, often crouched in prayer on the sidewalk. Albanians, Pakistanis and others who speak little Arabic listen to live English translations of the sermons through headsets. It is these congregants' crumpled dollar bills, collected in a cardboard box, that enable the mosque to survive.

Among the city's imams, Bay Ridge is seen as a humbling challenge.

"It's the first station for immigrants," said Mr. Moussa, Mr. Shata's predecessor. "And immigrants have a lot of problems."

Skip 911. Call the Imam.

Mr. Shata landed at Kennedy International Airport wearing a crimson felt hat and a long gray jilbab that fell from his neck to his sandaled toes, the proud dress of an Al



Marking the end of Ramadan, Mr. Shata's mosque, the Islamic Society

Azhar scholar. He spoke no English. But already, he carried some of the West inside. He could quote liberally from Voltaire, Shaw and Kant. For an Egyptian, he often jokes, he was inexplicably punctual.

The first thing Mr. Shata loved about America, like Germany, was the order. "In Egypt, if a person passes through a red light, that means he's smart," he said. "In America, he's very disrespected."

Americans stood in line. They tended their yards. One could call the police and hear a rap at the door minutes later. That fact impressed not only Mr. Shata, but also the women of his new mosque.

They had gained a reputation for odd calls to 911. One woman called because a relative abroad had threatened to take her inheritance. "The officers left and didn't write anything," Mr. Shata said, howling with laughter. "There was nothing for them to write."

Another woman called, angry because her husband had agreed to let a daughter from a previous marriage spend the night.

To Mr. Shata, the calls made sense. The women's parents, uncles and brothers — fig-

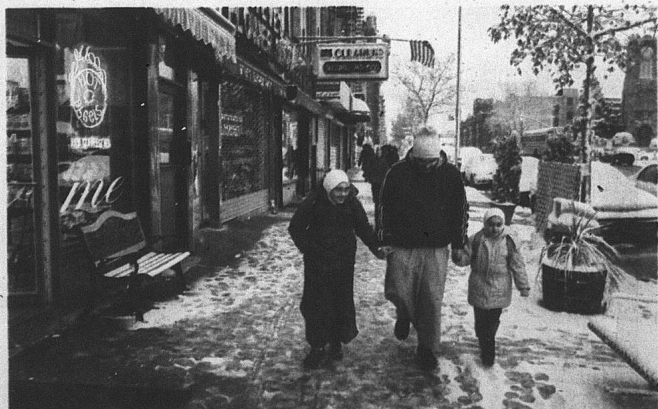
ures of authority in family conflict — were overseas. Instead, they dialed 911, hoping for a local substitute. Soon they would learn to call the imam.

A bearded man with a soft, bearded face, Mr. Shata struck his congregants as an odd blend of things. He was erudite yet funny, authoritative at the mosque's wooden pulpit and boisterously charming between prayers.

Homemakers, doctors, cabdrivers and shahks stopped by to assess the new imam. He regaled them with Dunkin' Donuts coffee, fetched by the Algerian keeper of the mosque, and then told long, poetic stories that left his visitors silent, their coffee cold.

"You just absorb every word he says," said Linda Sarsour, 25, a Muslim activist in Brooklyn.

The imam, too, was taking note. Things worked differently in America, where mosques were run as nonprofit organizations and congregants had a decidedly democratic air. Mr. Shata was shocked when a tone-deaf man insisted on giving the call to prayer. Such a man would be ridiculed in Egypt, where the callers, or muezzin, have



ISLAM ON THE GO

Each morning, Mr. Shata accompanies his daughters Esteshhad, 10, left, and Rahma, 6, to the bus stop of their Islamic school. Along the way, he quizzes them on passages from the Koran.



FULL HEARTS AND A FULL MOOSE

Photographs by JAMES ESTRINE/The New York Times

of Bay Ridge, attracted an overflow crowd. Since the mosque was founded a few blocks away in 1984, it has grown into a vital center for new Muslim immigrants.

"I try to be more of a doctor than a judge. A judge sentences. A doctor tries to remedy."

Sheikh Reda Shata

voices so beautiful they sometimes record top-selling CDs.

But in the land of equal opportunity, a man with a mediocre voice could claim discrimination. Mr. Shata relented. He shudders when the voice periodically sounds.

No sooner had Mr. Shata started his new job than all manner of problems arrived at his worn wooden desk: rebellious teenagers, marital strife, confessions of philandering, accusations of theft.

The imam responded creatively. Much of the drama involved hot dog vendors. There was the pair who shagged a stand, but could not stand each other. They came to the imam, who helped them divide the business.

The most notorious hot dog seller stood accused of stealing thousands of dollars in donations he had raised for the children of his deceased best friend. But there was no proof. The donations had been in cash. The solution, the imam decided, was to have the man swear an oath on the Koran.

"Whoever lies while taking an oath on the Koran goes blind afterward," said Mr. Shata, stating a belief that has proved useful in

cases of theft. A group of men lured the vendor to the mosque, where he confessed to stealing \$11,400. His admission was recorded in a waraqah, or document, penned in Arabic and signed by four witnesses. He returned the money in full.

Dozens of waraqas sit in the locked bottom drawer of the imam's desk. In one, a Brooklyn man who burned his wife with an iron vovs, in nervous Arabic scrawl, never to do it again. If he fails, he will owe her a \$10,000 "disciplinary fine." The police had intervened before, but the woman felt that she needed the imam's help.

For hundreds of Muslims, the Bay Ridge mosque has become a courthouse more welcoming than the one downtown, a police precinct more effective than the brick station blocks away. Even the police have used the imam's influence to their advantage, warning disorderly teenagers that they will be taken to the mosque rather than the station.

"They say: 'No, not the imam! He'll tell my parents,'" said Russell Kain, a recently retired officer of the 88th Precinct.

Mr. Shata shifted uncomfortably in his chair. There was nothing he loathed more than grating a divorce.

"It's very hard for me to let him divorce you," he said. "How can I meet God on Judgment Day?"

"It's God's law also to have divorce," she shot back. The debate continued.

Finally, Mr. Shata asked for her parents' phone number in Egypt. Over the speakerphone, they anxiously urged the imam to relent. Their daughter was clearly miserable, and they were too far away to intervene.

With a sigh, Mr. Shata asked his executive secretary, Mohamed, to print a divorce certificate. In the rare instance when the imam agrees to issue one, it is after a couple has filed for divorce with the city.

"Since you're the one demanding divorce, you can't get back together with him," the imam warned. "Ever."

The woman smiled politely.

"What matters for us is the religion," she said later. "Our law is our religion."

The religion's fiqh, or jurisprudence, is built on 14 centuries of scholarship, but imams in Europe and America often find this body of law insufficient to address life in the West. The guardaries of America were foreign to Mr. Shata.

Pornography was rampant, prompting a question Mr. Shata had never heard in Egypt: Is oral sex lawful? Pork and alcohol are forbidden in Islam, raising questions about whether Muslims could sell beer or bacon. Tired of the menacing stares in the subway, women wanted to know if they could remove their headscarves. Muslims were navigating their way through problems Mr. Shata had never fathomed.

For a while, the imam called his fellow sheikhs in Egypt with requests for fatwas, or nonbinding legal rulings. But their views carried little relevance to life in America. Some issues, like oral sex, he dared not raise. Over time, he began to find his own answers and became, as he put it, flexible.

Is a Big Mac permissible? Yes, the imam says, but not a bacon cheeseburger.

It is a woman's right, Mr. Shata believes, to remove her hijab if she feels threatened. Muslims can take jobs serving alcohol and pork, he says, but only if other work cannot be found. Oral sex is acceptable, but only between married couples. Mortgages, he says, are necessary to move forward in America.

"Islam is supposed to make a person's life easier, not harder," Mr. Shata explained.

In some ways, the imam has resisted

change. He has learned little English, and interviews with Mr. Shata over the course of six months required the use of a translator.

Some imams in the United States make a point of shaking hands with women, distancing themselves from the view that such contact is improper. Mr. Shata offers women only a nod.

Daily, he passes the cinema next to his mosque but has never seen a movie in a theater. He says music should be forbidden if it "encourages sexual desire." He won't convert a non-Muslim when it seems more a matter of convenience than true belief.

"Religion is not a piece of clothing that you change," he said after turning away an Ecuadorean immigrant who sought to convert for her Syrian husband. "I don't want someone coming to Islam tonight and leaving it in the morning."

Trust in God's Plan

Ten months after he came to America, Mr. Shata collapsed.

It was Friday. The mosque was full. Hundreds of men sat pressed together, their shirts damp with summer. Their wives and daughters huddled in the women's section, one floor below. Word of the imam's sermons had spread, drawing Muslims from Albany and Hartford.

"Praise be to Allah," began Mr. Shata, his voice slowly rising.

Minutes later, the imam recalled, the room began to spin. He fell to the carpet, lost consciousness and spent a week in the hospital, plagued by several symptoms. A social worker and a counselor who treated the imam both said he suffered from exhaustion. The counselor, Ali Gheith, called it "compassion fatigue," an ailment that commonly affects disaster-relief workers.

It was not just the long hours, the new culture and the ceaseless demands that weighed on the imam. Most troubling were the psychological woes of his congregants, which seemed endless.

Sept. 11 had wrought depression and anxiety among Muslims. But unlike many priests or rabbis, imams lacked pastoral training in mental health and knew little about the social services available.

At heart was another complicated truth: Imams often approach mental illness from a strictly Islamic perspective. Hardship is viewed as a test of faith, and the answer can be found in tawakkul, trusting in God's plan. The remedy typically suggested by imams is a spiritual one, sought through fasting, prayer and reflection.

Muslim immigrants also limit themselves to religious solutions because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, said Hamada Hamid, a resident psychiatrist at New York University who founded The Journal of Muslim Mental Health. "If somebody says, 'You need this medication, someone may respond, 'I have tawakkul,'" he said.

Mr. Gheith, a Palestinian immigrant who works in disaster preparedness for the city's health department, began meeting with the imam regularly after his collapse. Mr. Shata needed to learn to disconnect from his congregants, Mr. Gheith said. It was a concept that confounded the imam.

"I did not permit these problems to enter my heart," said Mr. Shata, "nor can I permit them to leave."

The conversations eventually led to a city-wide program for imams, blending Islam with psychology. Mr. Shata learned to identify the symptoms of mental illness and began referring people to treatment.

His congregants often refuse help, blaming black magic or the evil eye for their problems. The evil eye is believed to be a curse driven by envy, confirmed in the bad things that happen to them.

One Palestinian couple in California insisted that their erratic 18-year-old son had the evil eye. He was brought to the imam's attention after wounding up on the streets of New York, and eventually received a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Mr. Shata had less success with a man who worshipped at the mosque. He had become paranoid, certain his wife was cursing him with witchcraft. But he refused treatment, insisting divorce was the only cure.

Time and again, Mr. Shata's new country has called for creativity and patience, for a careful negotiation between tradition and modernity.

"Here you don't know what will solve a problem," he said. "It's about looking for a key."

TOMORROW

One of the greatest challenges facing imams in America since Sept. 11 is their relationship with law enforcement, which is marked by tension and often clashing loyalties. Sheikh Reda Shata has tried to strike a balance that allows him to assist the authorities while preserving the confidence and respect of his congregants. That struggle faced a serious test when one member of his mosque was charged with plotting to bomb a city subway station.

ONLINE: PHOTOS AND AUDIO
Sheikh Reda Shata discusses the challenges facing an imam in America. Also, audio with the Times's Andrea Elliott.

nytimes.com/nyregion



TOUGH DUTY

One of Mr. Shata's least favorite tasks is granting divorces. Still, he is often called upon to counsel congregants like this one who want to end marriages.