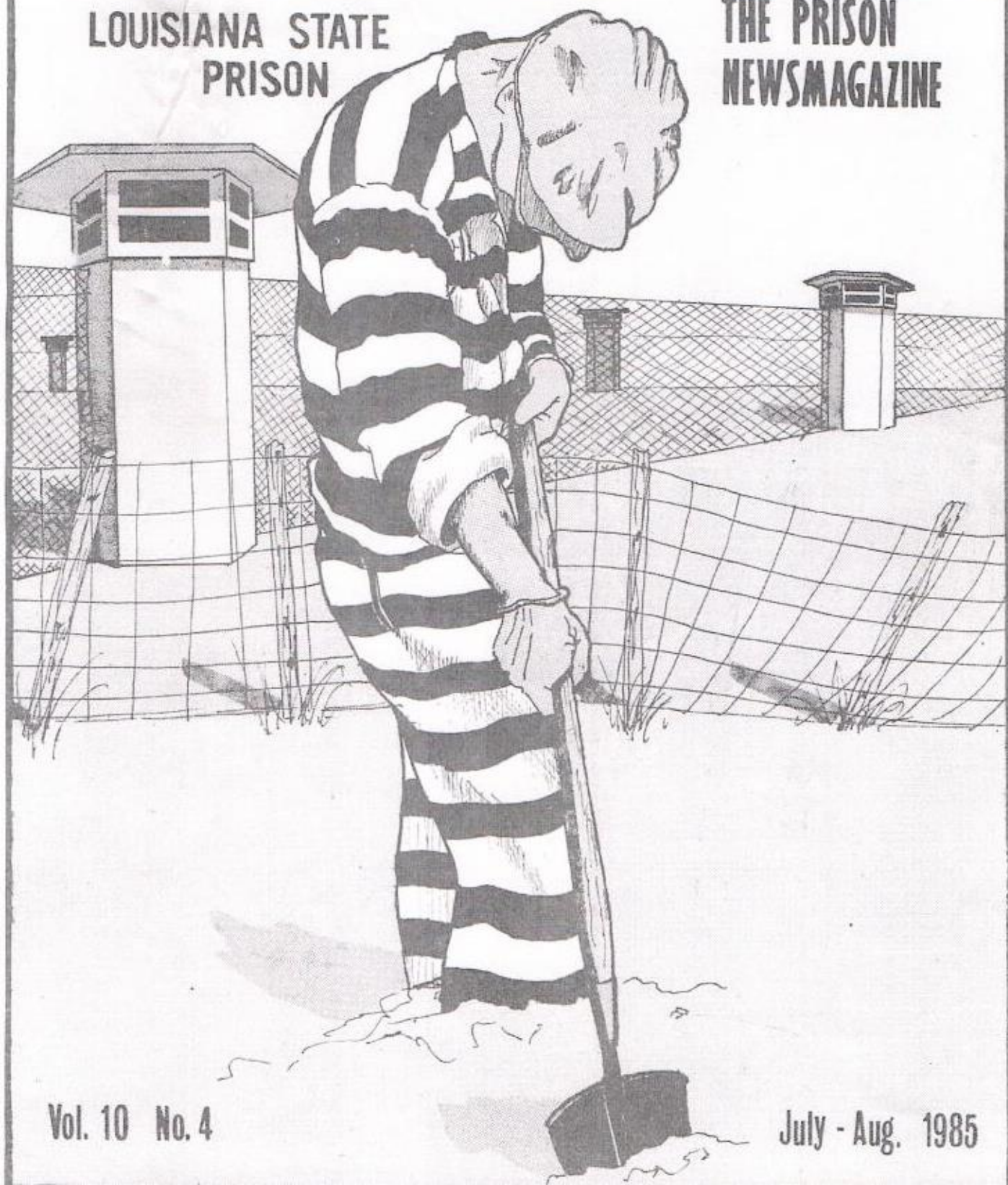


THE ANGOLITE

LOUISIANA STATE
PRISON

THE PRISON
NEWSMAGAZINE



Vol. 10 No. 4

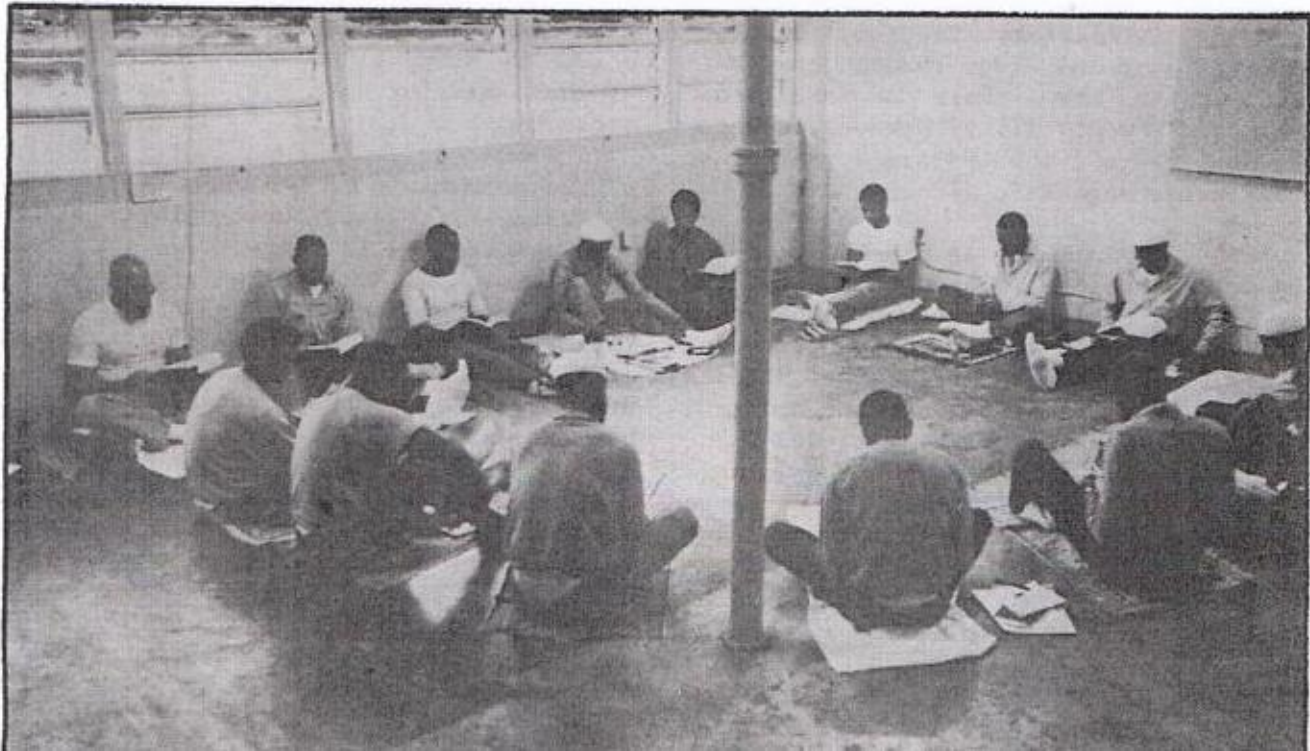
July - Aug. 1985

religion in prison

The Muslims

Of all the religious faiths, none has caused as much consternation among the nation's penal authorities, nor paid as heavy a price for acceptance as a legitimate religion in the prison world, as the Islamic faith over the past three decades. Because of its initial black nationalism and opposition to the same socio-economic system that held them prisoner, it held a powerful appeal for the nation's black convicts. As increasing numbers of black inmates embraced the movement, authori-

ties began to see it as a threat to penal and national security and openly tried to crush the movement. Strikes, riots, deaths and lawsuits marked the struggle that followed. It was the Muslims who began the prisoners' rights movement by having to go to court seeking religious freedoms back in the late '50s and early '60s. From their legal efforts came a number of judicial precedents concerning prison conditions, particularly in relation to solitary confinement and the treatment ac-

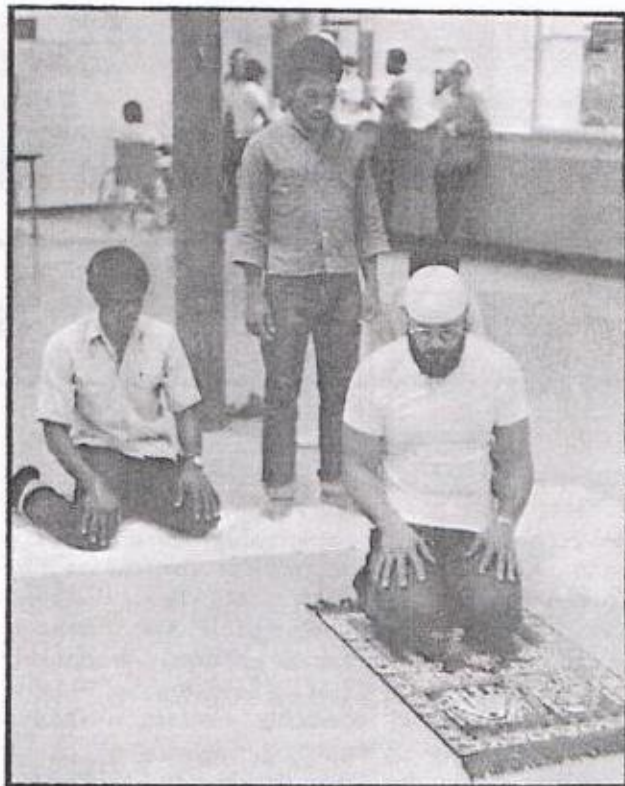


RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

corded them. They won, but paid a heavy price for the victory.

While little was heard of the Islamic movement in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, they too had to struggle to establish themselves the same as their brethren in other institutions around the nation. In the beginning, many of them were routinely locked up because of the general belief that a Muslim was automatically a revolutionary who wanted to kill whites. Overt repression of the Muslims ended in the mid-'70s when a class of two dozen began with permission of the wardens. But while the upper echelon of the prison administration was willing to permit the Muslims to practice their faith, penal personnel at the lower levels --believing, as did most of the nation's whites, that the Islamic movement was anti-white and advocated black supremacy and the violent overthrow of the existing order-- continued their hostility toward them, underscoring it with various forms of harassment. The Islamic cause wasn't helped by the inmate Muslims' practice of parading in military fashion, complete with uniforms and flag, through the Main Prison to and from their organizational meetings. The hostility, however, eventually tapered off and, within a year or so, the Muslims were left alone.

Rasheed Amin Mumin is the 41-year-old leader of Angola's Islamic community. The New Orleans native has served eight years at Angola on a 40-year sentence for bank robbery. He came here from the Atlanta federal penitentiary, where he spent 5½ years for the same crime. It was there that he became introduced to the Islamic faith. Prior to then, he had not subscribed to any religious faith, but Islam appealed to him "because of the organization they had and the discipline they practiced aimed at helping you to become a better human being," he explains. "That is what attracted me to it and got me involved." In October 1973, he became a practicing Muslim, something he's continued since coming to Angola in 1978. In



1982, he was elected Iman of the Islamic community here, a position that members of the community have ratified every year since.

The membership of the Angola Islamic community fluctuates between 14 to 20 active members, with "about 25 more who call themselves Muslims but are not practicing in the community," Mumin states. Their small number make them a minority in Angola's religious community, not to mention the prison's overall 4,700-man population.

"To some degree, because we're a minority, people have a tendency to see what we're practicing as being something alien," Mumin says, "and since they don't understand what we're about, it sometimes causes problems for us in the form of discrimination - sometimes it's serious, sometimes not.

"Much of the bias we encounter is tied

RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

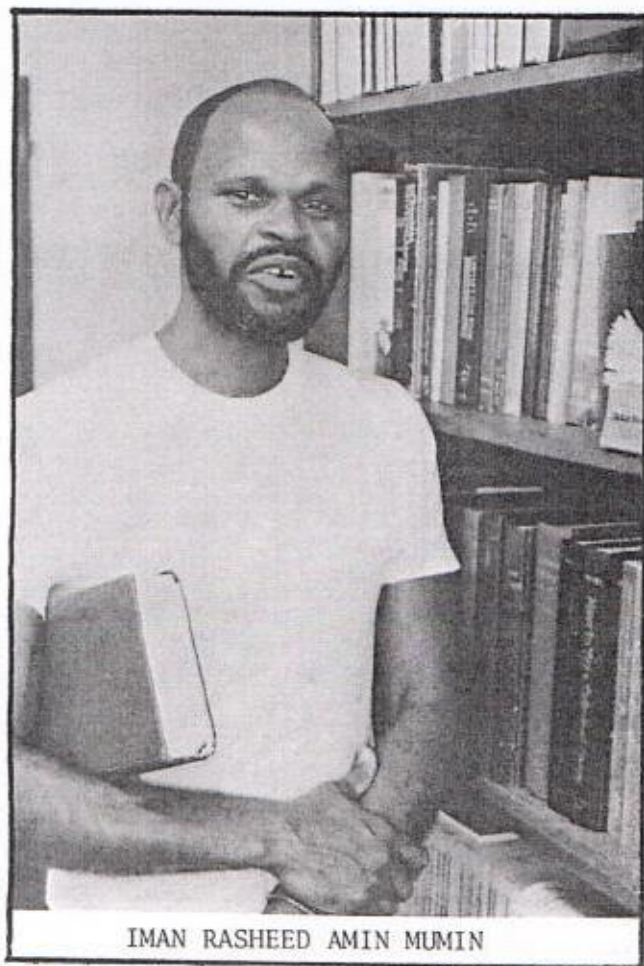
into what people think we think rather than what we actually think," he explains. "To clarify that - the problem is that people have the tendency of looking at us and judging us by what we taught before 1975. However, in 1975, Iman Warith D. Muhammad became the leader of the then-Nation of Islam and, with the help of Almighty God, has turned the true following away from racism and nationalism to true Al-Islam, which is trying to live a life that is pleasing to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. We consider ourselves members of the community of worldwide Islam and that's people who follow as their Number One guide, the Holy Koran, and their Number Two guide is the tradition of Prophet Mohammad - peace be upon him. And our intention for the future is to study and practice this teaching which is founded upon the principle

of peace.

"There've been improvements in attitude towards us since I've been here - but there's still a way to go," he states, pointing out that "some individuals in the administration are very tolerant, some very biased."

Ramadan is observed once a year by the Islamic community. It entails a month of fasting during daylight hours to celebrate the last revelation given to the Prophet Mohammad 1400 years ago. At the end of the month, there's a feast, and Muslims around the world take off a day or two in celebration of the victory of Ramadan. Not too long ago, Angola's Muslims requested a similar day off from their prison job assignments in observance of the victory of Ramadan. "We were denied on the grounds that no other religious groups in the prison get a day off for religious observance," Mumin states. "But that's not so. Christians, for example, get Christmas and Easter, and even days before and after, off for religious observance. When I later brought this fact to the attention of Chaplain (Joseph) Wilson, he agreed that I was right. But it was too late. Our day had passed."

That, like many other things, is attributed to the lack of understanding of our religion and a lack of any real attempt to understand it," he explains. "They need to understand the tenets of Islam. Ironically, because of the lack of understanding, we get more consideration and respect from security administrators than we do from the administrative officials in charge of religion and treatment. When we went to security, they readily arranged the opportunity for us to observe Ramadan and told us that they had no problem with our being given the day off to celebrate the victory of Ramadan. But they didn't have the authority to make that decision. The chaplaincy and warden of treatment had to make the decision, and we ran into opposition from them and the decision was no. This is



IMAN RASHEED AMIN MUMIN

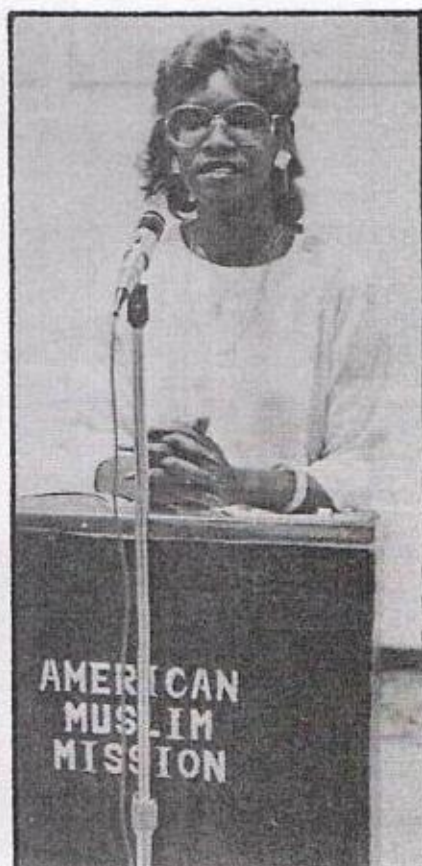
RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

what we mean by lack of understanding. Security sees us every day, they know us, and they understand what we're about and how we conduct ourselves and handle our affairs. Administrative decision-makers don't. And this magnifies a problem in the prison that's deeper than it may seem. The people who are over religion and treatment are actually responsible for rehabilitation and for making management decisions that impact the entire inmate population. They should be more supportive of self-help efforts and activities."

Though a minority, Angola's Muslims make their presence known and felt in the prison community. In the sports arena, their volleyball team, the Bilalian Strivers, has reigned supreme for the past three years, winning the championship in 1983 and 1984 and had taken it again this year - until a ruling on an official pro-

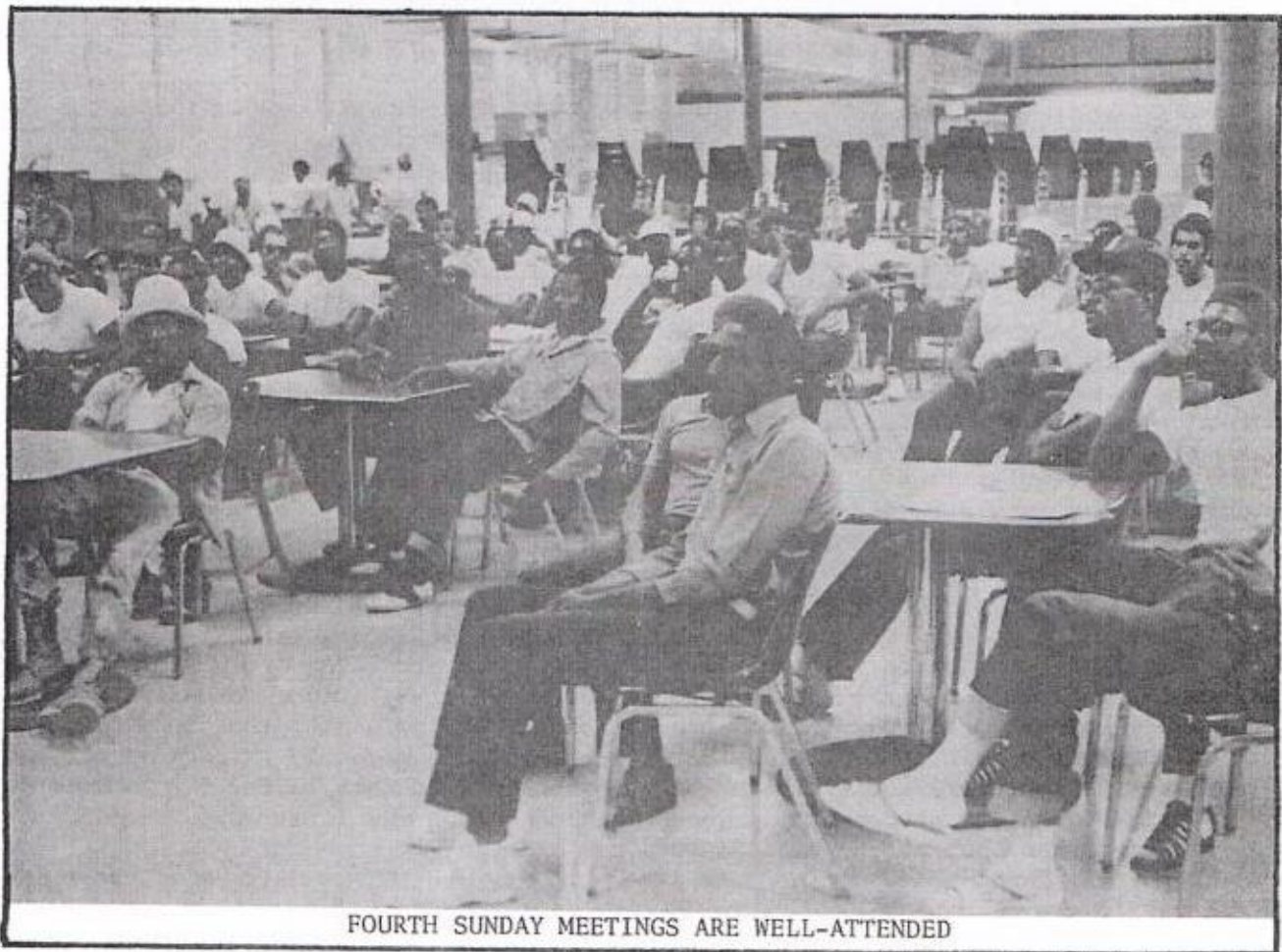
test stripped them of it (see SPORTS FRONT). The Muslims also have a softball team, which they entertain high hopes for.

But sports is only one arena of endeavor they're involved in. A major pursuit is self-improvement. Toward that end, the Muslims conduct courses in public speaking, salesmanship and law. On the fourth Sunday of each month, outside speakers with expertise in varying fields are invited to share their knowledge with those in attendance. A recent fourth Sunday gathering featured Fahmee Sabree, Iman of the Baton Rouge Islamic community; Alexandria's KALB-TV assignments editor Adreann Leufrey who lectured on effective communication skills; and Sandra D. King, spokesperson for the Louisiana Black Alcoholism Council, who enlightened the inmates on the council and its purpose. The fourth Sunday meetings of the Islamic community



SHARING KNOWLEDGE -- LEUFREY, SABREE & KING

RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)



FOURTH SUNDAY MEETINGS ARE WELL-ATTENDED

usually draw around 130 inmates. "We have a lot of sympathizers," Mumin explains. "Islam is a comprehensive religion and it calls for a strict adherence to its principles. Now, there are a substantial number of people who like it, but they realize that they can't personally be that strict and can't become involved in it whole-heartedly. So they're just sympathizers."

The external sponsor of the Angola Islamic community is Iman Wali Raof of New Orleans, who visits the inmate Muslims twice a month to talk and counsel with them. "We get a sufficient amount of support from the outside community for what

we're doing," Mumin states. "I say that because we have to be basically self-sufficient in here, somewhat independent because the penitentiary is designed to cripple us in every other way with regard to our being responsible human beings. The only support we look for is their coming in every now and then to counsel."

The problems of today facing the Muslims are not as monumental as those of the past. But while the Muslims have been recognized and accepted as a viable religious faith in the prison world of Angola, they still find themselves having to struggle for understanding and parity.