

History of Islam in the United States

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Introduction

There is a real dearth of scholarly work on Islam in general in this country, not to mention the study of the history of Islam in the United States. When compared to critical studies of the history of Islam in China or Islam in Western Europe, very little work has been done here. It were almost as though the history of Islam in this country did not merit serious examination. While preparing this paper, I decided to do an Internet search on the history of Islam in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although I was convinced that I would find some materials, I found absolutely nothing. Then I decided to broaden it and do a search on the history of Islam in the state of California. Once again, almost nothing. So, what began as a paper for this society will, *insha 'allah*, become part of a study of the historiography and history of Islam in this area. This paper is part of a much larger work in progress in which I intend to approach this study using the analytical tools of cultural geography, cultural studies and diaspora studies, looking at the roles that notions of gender, race, nationhood, heresy, borders, fluidities, etc., and their intersections play in the shaping of this history and its historiography.

Islamophobia

Before going any further, it is important to consider the role of Islamophobia in the shaping of this historiography. The term "Islamophobia" refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals (or those perceived to be Muslim) and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from political and social affairs. The word "Islamophobia" has been developed because anti-Muslim prejudice has

grown so considerably, so intensely and so rapidly in recent years that it has been of crucial importance that it be identified and named. A crucial part of the Islamophobic discourse is the representation of Islam as something monolithic and static, lacking in diversity and dynamism. It portrays Islam as the Evil Other, separate from anything that might be remotely familiar to Western Christians. For example, it is much more realistic to speak of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim heritage, but that is not done since it would violate one of the major tenets of Islamophobia; i.e., that Islam is Wholly Other! With this demonised alterity is embedded inferiority and the notion of Islam as violent and manipulative. One has only to read “Orientalism” or other works of Edward Said to understand that Orientalism substands Islamophobia and shapes the ways in which Islam is studied and represented in this country. One cannot remove from consciousness the awareness of what is happening globally as regards Islam; these are all elements that go into the shaping of the study and documentation of the history of Islam in this country.

Furthermore, when studying the history of Islam in the United States one has not only to deal with Islamophobia but with systemic racism as well. Given that the history of Islam in this country, from the time of the Middle Passage until well into the middle of the 20th century, is the history of African American Muslims, then it should not be surprising to us that this history has suffered from much of the same indifference as African American history in general, especially as it relates to other histories in this country. So, the dynamics of racialised Islamophobia shape a context in which it becomes all the more imperative to read in the in-between spaces, to analyze absences, and to “read” cultural artifacts as “text.”

Pre-Columbian Islam

One of the most startling aspects of this research is looking at information that indicates that Muslims or people believed to be Muslims were present in the Americas before the European *conquistadores*. According to scholars such as Dr. Abdullah Hakim Quick, Sultan Abu Bakr II of Mali is believed to have traveled in 1312 CE from the Senegambian region of Western Africa to the Gulf of Mexico. This information comes to us from the work of ibn-Fadlallah al-Omari, a Muslim historian whose work has provided us with a great deal of information on mediaeval African kingdoms in the Sahelian region of Africa. Quick and other scholars have looked in-depth at inscriptions indicating the presence of Arabic elements in indigenous languages. They also point to artifacts and cultural practices such as naming patterns, dress, etc., which, for them, would point to contact between Muslims from West Africa and indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Muslims in the post-Reconquista Americas

After the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 and finally in 1609, we begin to witness the emergence of an architectural style in the Americas that is directly linked to the experience and history of Muslim Spain. Islamic aesthetic practices and traditions were introduced into the Americas from the beginning of Spanish occupation of the Americas until the late 19th century. These aesthetic practices and traditions grew out of an extremely rich genre of architectural and decorative tropes that had evolved in Muslim Spain from the 8th century CE until the time of the *reconquista*. The Spanish missionaries brought with them a composite of Andalusian styles, infused with many intersecting levels of meanings. These architectural styles that gave rise to the so-called “Moorish” styles of the Americas were the starting point of an architectural language that reflects an amalgam of new and old elements. Spanish Muslims brought the *mudejar* (a Spanish word from the Arabic *mudajjan*, “permitted to remain,” referring to any of the Muslims who remained in Spain after the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the 11th to the 15th centuries) style to the Americas at the end of the 15th century. Another wave of craftsmen fled Spain after the final expulsion of Muslims and Jews in 1609; they were held in high esteem for their artistry, skill and workmanship in iron, brass, stone and wood. In the United States, the *Mudejar* style, later to be known as “Spanish” or “Californian,” may now be found in Texas, Arizona, Florida and New Mexico. The Muslim presence lives on through this architectural and aesthetic heritage.

The Early United States and the Muslim World

In order to look at the history of Islam in the United States, it is also important to examine briefly some of the contacts between the nascent United States and the Muslim world of that era. In the 1790s, U.S. presses produced a flood of literature on the Muslim world: histories; biographies of the Prophet Muhammad; captivity narratives; poems and stories; and the first U.S. edition of the Arabian Nights. The point of this literature was to show that the new world of the United States was far superior not only to Europe, but also to the Muslim world. This attitude was strengthened in the early 19th century by the war with Tripoli. The United States felt that it had been able to do what no European power had been able to do: defeat the forces of Islamic “despotism and piracy.” However, looking at the realities of slavery in the United States always undermined this sense of superiority to the Muslim world.

Middle Passage

Of the millions of Africans that were forcibly deported to the Americas, probably as many as 40 to 60 percent were Muslim, and 20 percent of that population would have been Muslim women slaves. Men, such as Muhammad Cisse’ of Nianimarou in the upper reaches of the Gambia River and Ayub

ibn Sulayman Diallo, are known to us today thanks to the New York Ethnological Society of the mid-19th century, which had an interest in collecting information on Muslim slaves. Another example would be that of Yoro Mahmoud of Georgetown (Washington, D.C.), a freed slave who bought his own house. He resisted forced conversion to Christianity and continued to practise Islam publicly.

In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) went to the Georgia Sea Islands, where they gathered stories from the descendants of the Muslim slaves, Bilali and Salih Bilali. They spoke of their ancestors as still wearing Islamic style clothing, practicing Islam, speaking and writing Arabic. Bilali wrote an Arabic manuscript, entitled the “First Fruits of Happiness,” based on a West African (Maliki) Islamic legal text known as “*ar-Risala*.” His text showed how daily life could be rooted in a holistic practice of Islam. The great-grandchildren of Bilali and Salih Bilali told of how their grandmothers, Fatima, Bintou, Medina, Yarrabuh, Margaret, Hester and Charlotte, wore *hijab* and cooked rice cakes for the children at the end of fasting days. A history of food, as well as of clothing, names and religious practices, helps in the archaeology of African Muslim presence in the United States. These narratives also help locate African Muslim women as engaged in practices of cultural resistance that have allowed us to have a sustained sense of their presence today.

Islam in the Experience of Early 20th Century African Americans

The post-Reconstruction years, leading up to the Great Migration (1915-1930) from the South to the North, were traumatic years for African Americans. This was a period of intense displacement and exile, of a transition for many from the rural south to the urban north. The Great Migration basically created a population of Black refugees from the horrors of the apartheid South. Race riots, police-sanctioned torture and executions, castrations and rapes created a climate of racial violence that led many to seek an identity outside of the horrors of the United States. People were looking for something that would help them find meaning in what appeared to be a meaningless and violently chaotic world. This situation of alienation provided the context for a quest for authenticity, for a positive identity. The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam were both products of this quest.

Moorish Science Temple

Noble Drew Ali in Newark, New Jersey, founded the Moorish Science Temple in 1913. Other than the *Qur'an*, it is not clear that they had access to even the most basic of Islamic texts. They published a lot of literature to help refugees from the South learn how to read and write in English. Noble Drew Ali posited that Black people in this country were actually descendants of Moroccans. The texts that he produced reflected influences from Theosophy as well as his personal interest in the history of ancient Egypt. He also used symbols from Freemasonry, for he was aware that African

American Freemasonry was an important conduit for religious ideas and rituals from the “East,” as well as for Pan-African thought. His “Holy Koran” (or the “Circle Seven Koran”) was a combination of esoteric texts and elements of a translation of the *Qur’an*. The MST, which still exists, had prominent women leaders (*shaykhat*). After Noble Drew Ali was murdered in 1929, the community began to decrease in numbers. However, it has been estimated that 10,000 African Americans had had some affiliation with the MST by 1950. As Prof. Richard Turner and others point out, the Federal Bureau of Investigation engaged in a carefully planned campaign to dismantle the Moorish Science Temple and other African American Muslim groups. In the 1940s, the FBI placed all African American Muslim groups under the rubric of “Extremist Muslim Groups and Violence.” This conflation of Islamophobia and racism plays an important role in the writing of the history of Islam in the United States. We cannot underestimate how this helped shape contemporary attitudes towards Islam.

The Nation of Islam

Elijah Muhammad, later known as the “Messenger of Allah,” was a skilled labourer from Georgia who migrated to Detroit, Mich.. In the early 1930s, his wife, Clara Muhammad, introduced him to Wali Fard Muhammad. Without her, there might never have been a Nation of Islam. Wali Fard Muhammad’s origins remain cloaked in mystery. Fard, who was believed to be divine, taught that African Americans were descendants of the “original Black nation of Asia, the Tribe of Shabazz,” and that they had lost their original religion, Islam, as well as their original “nationality,” African Asiatic. In his theology, white people were the descendants of a genetic mutation developed by a mad scientist named Yacub. Fard, and later Elijah Muhammad, who would succeed him as the head of the Nation of Islam, blended these teachings along with some practices from Islam. Needless to say, the U.S. government closely watched the Nation of Islam. Beginning in 1942, the FBI carried out a series of attacks on Black Muslim homes and mosques. However, by the 1950s, the Nation of Islam had spread throughout the United States and became the major voice for Islam in the United States. The Nation built a national network of businesses and schools, which came to be known as the Clara Muhammad Schools.

The Nation stood up under relentless FBI and CIA persecution and still tried to teach something to help African Americans construct positive identities. It was through the Nation of Islam that Malcolm X came to international attention. For almost 15 years, he was the face of the Nation of Islam. In 1964, Malcolm X broke all ties with the Nation of Islam and embraced Sunni Islam. It was also through Malcolm X that the struggles of African Americans were connected to anti-imperialist independence struggles of other peoples around the world. Malcolm X, or El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, as he was known at the end of his life, provided and continues to provide inspiration for many to embrace Islam. Spike Lee’s filmic version of Malcolm’s life assured El-Hajj Malik el-

Shabazz' place in popular culture in the United States, bringing the diverse images of the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, into the consciousness of millions in this country.

With the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son Warithuddeen Muhammad, became the head of the Nation. He dismantled the theology of the Nation and began the process of leading it into Sunni Islam. The organization went through several name changes, starting with "The World Community of al-Islam in the West" and ending up with its current name, "The American Society of Muslims." Elijah Muhammad's brother, John Muhammad did not accept the World Community and proclaimed himself as the Supreme Minister of the Nation of Islam and continued his brother's teachings. In 1978, Louis Farrakhan announced his departure from the World Community to re-establish the Nation of Islam. In recent years, he and Warithuddeen have appeared together at each other's conventions and spoken of reconciliation between the groups. Both groups maintain close ties with the international Muslim world. However, it was not only through these groups that Muslims indigenous to the United States were to be connected to the Muslim *ummah*.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement

In the first half of the 20th century, the Ahmadiyya, a movement that grew up in the 1880s in the Punjab, played a great role in teaching Islam in the United States. Considered "heretical" by many Muslims for their belief in on-going prophecy, the Ahmadiyya thought of themselves as a renewal movement within Islam and engaged in global missionary outreach.

It is believed that the first documented white U.S. convert to Islam, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, had a connection to the Ahmadiyya in India. Webb served as U.S. consul in the Philippines from 1887-1892 and is thought to have converted sometime around 1888. Coming from a background in Theosophy, Webb engaged in missionary work briefly on the West Coast. In 1892, he established the American Moslem Brotherhood in New York. The following year, he went on to establish the Moslem World Publishing Company, which published his book, "Islam in America." He published about 26-six volumes of *The Moslem World* and the *Voice of Islam*. In that same year, 1893, he was the primary representative for Islam at the World's Parliament of Religions.

The first Ahmadiyya missionary to the United States, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, arrived in 1920 during a period of great anti-Asian hostility. In 1917, the United States had passed the so-called Oriental Exclusion Act, followed in 1921 by the Johnson Act, which established strict quotas for Asian immigrants. In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act effectively closed the door to most non-European immigrants. These acts would have a tremendous impact on the development of the Muslim com-

munity in the United States. They created a context in which the predominant racial/ethnic group in the Muslim community would continue to be that of African descent up until the 1960s, when these acts were repealed.

In 1917, The Ahmadiyya published the first English interpretation of the *Qur'an* for the United States. For decades, they provided the majority of English-language Islamic literature (especially *Qur'ans* and commentaries on the *Qur'an*) for all of the various African American Muslim communities. The goal of the Ahmadiyya was to build broad-based, multi-ethnic/multi-racial/multi-cultural Muslim communities in the United States, bringing together Muslims of all colors. This work of fostering pan-Islamic unity manifested in the creation of a Society for the Protection of Islam in the United States. In 1921, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq published the first issue of *The Moslem Sunrise*, which was created for the express purpose of countering the misrepresentation of Islam in the United States press. Women converts, especially African American women, played a central role in the life of this community. For example, Fatima Mustafa (the first documented U.S. woman of European descent to embrace Islam) and Madame Rahmatullah (an African American), played important roles in teaching Islam. Many jazz musicians, such as Talib Daud, Art Blakey, Yusef Lateef, Ahmad Jamal, and McCoy Tyner, encountered Islam through the Ahmadiyya. From the early 20th century until the 1960s, when Muslim immigrants from other countries began to arrive in the United States and openly attack the Islamicity of the Ahmadiyya, the movement was predominantly African American with African American leaders. Once again, it is important to note the role that immigration patterns play in the shaping of the history of Islam in the United States.

The Growth of Immigrant Muslim Communities

One of the difficulties in tracing the early waves of Muslim immigration to the United States is the fact that such immigrants would often change their names and intermarry with U.S. non-Muslims. However, one of the first mentions in the 19th century of a non-African Muslim is Hajj Ali (whom people in the U.S. called “Hi Jolly”) who, in 1856, was brought by the U.S. Cavalry to the deserts of Arizona and California to help breed camels. He apparently stayed on to search for gold after the experiment ended.

The period between 1820-1860 was the context for the arrival of small numbers of Turkish Muslims. However, by the early 1900s, there were much larger numbers of Turks who settled in major urban centres, such as New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and San Francisco.

The years 1875-1912 and 1918-1922 saw the arrival of Muslim immigrants from the area known as Greater Syria (Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon) under the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Many of

these immigrants settled in the Midwest, choosing to attempt to assimilate. Along with changing their names and intermarrying, they often ended up leaving Islam for some form of Western Christianity. These Muslims, with few exceptions, had no contact with indigenous Muslims.

As early as 1895, Muslims from the Punjab settled in California, Oregon, Washington and Western Canada. The early Punjabi immigrant communities included both Sikhs and Muslims; however, most U.S. citizens tended to refer to them as “Hindoos.” This is a factor that complicates historical research on these communities. Another very interesting factor is that since the Punjabi immigrants were not allowed to bring women with them and since anti-miscegenation laws forbade marrying white women, many of them in California married women of Mexican descent. This created a Mexican-Punjabi community in which Muslim men married Roman Catholic women. This is an area that has yet to be explored in depth.

From 1900-1906, significant numbers of Bosnian Muslims began to arrive in Chicago. They established important communities in Gary, Ind., and in Butte, Mont.

North Dakota was home to some of the earliest documented Muslim groups in the United States. In the early 1900s, Muslims gathered for prayers in the town of Ross. They built a mosque in 1920, but it was later abandoned as most of the members of the community had converted to Christianity. Cedar Rapids, Iowa, had an important Muslim community. The first documented continuing mosque was started there in 1920 in a rental space; in 1934, the actual mosque building was completed. This mosque is often referred to as the “Mother Mosque of the United States.”

In 1907, Muslims from Poland, Russia and Lithuania established the American Mohammedan Society in Brooklyn and established a mosque there in the 1930s.

In the years between 1914 and 1922, Arab Muslims began to settle in Detroit, Mich., and surrounding areas, especially Dearborn. They were drawn to these areas to work in the Ford automobile industry. This area now has one of the largest Muslim communities in the United States. It was also in Detroit, in 1920, that the Red Crescent, a charitable organisation modeled on the International Red Cross, was established.

By the early 1900s, Albanian Muslims began arriving in the United States. In 1915, they established an organisation and a mosque in Biddeford, Maine, and established another mosque in Connecticut in 1919.

From the 1960s on, there has been a steady influx of Muslims of all sorts from throughout the world. In 1963, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) was begun. The 1960s also witness an important upsurge in the building of mosques. Islamic literature other than the publications and translations of the Ahmadiyya Society now become readily available.

The contemporary history of Islam is profoundly marked by the radical diversity that exists within the *ummah* in the United States. Here, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the world, Muslims of all types live and pray side by side. In the San Francisco Bay Area, our communities are made up of, for example, Chinese, Pilipino, Sri Lankan, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali, Latina/o, Native American, European-American, Bosnian, Polynesian, Russian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Thai, African American, mixed-heritage, Fijian Muslims, as well as those from countries that are traditionally associated with Islam. Latina/o Muslims are the most rapidly growing new Muslim population in the country. In the U.S. prison-industrial complex, the rate of conversion to Islam may be more than 30,000 each year; it is estimated that more than 300,000 prisoners are converts to Islam.

Recent articles on Muslim rap and hip-hop show the impact of Islam on popular culture in this country. The popularity of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi cannot be separated from the significant presence of Sufi orders in the United States. It is also important to acknowledge the role that Sufism has played in the spread of Islam in the United States, just as it did in India, Indonesia, Central Asia, West Africa, etc.

The Internet plays an important role in connecting Muslims in the United States to each other and to Muslims elsewhere. The current global situation has a profound impact on Muslims living here, as Muslims struggle to articulate and negotiate varying ways of being in the world. The rich diversity and creativity that emerge remind us of these words from Sura Ar-Rum (30), ayah 22, in the Holy *Qur'an*: “And among G-d’s signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and colors: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of knowledge!”

ALHAMDULILLAH!

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