

Potential Approaches or Examining African American Muslims

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Editorial

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Editorial

Islam in America in the 21st century is a myriad of communities with differing political ideologies, cultural seatings and understandings of American society. Their stories are frequently related as quantitative renderings of how many of them there are, where they live and their answers to survey questions on attitudes on questions of pluralism. I have chosen to write briefly on the African American Muslim community in the 21st century. Just as people around the world evince their cultural heritage, African American Muslims do also. They are not the products of colonial incursions or military take-overs. They have been born through almost five generations as Americans though often treated as second class citizens. Nevertheless, they have the same tastes and love of modern conveniences as do other Americans.

Researchers, storytellers, and others often study religious communities in the world. They take the presence of these communities as a given historical fact or investigate them as new people who moved into old occupied spaces or individuals who become groups within communities who take a different spiritual path. The latter is the case of African American Muslims. This article aims to outline new approaches to study.

The story of African American Islam has consistently been framed outside of its lived experience with results consistently constructing a monolith that is different than an actual multi-varied existence. Media have validated the Arab Muslim world's assertion of a "real Islam" as the only accepted version of the faith. Every world cultural community of Islam should be held to this standard or be declared "unIslamic." Some African American Muslims continue to attempt to this standard which is culturally untenable while others are invested in an American Islam. These latter efforts have been characterized as "pseudo or heterodox." This framing of global Islamic adherence

glosses over the rich textures of difference that inform a robust American religious tradition and in many ways an illegitimate Islam.

This is not about 'Islams' where there are different distinct versions of the core of Islam rather it speaks to the natural cultural appropriation of religious traditions. Islam settled as a religious faith tradition in many already established cultures around the world. While prior beliefs about God changed along with religious texts, cultural traditions rarely changed but appropriated the core of Islam as a way of expressing those traditions. For example, Hindus and Muslims come from the same set of cultural traditions around food, family, marriage and preferences for adornment. Yet, their religious traditions are different. Islam does not have a centralized authority although Saudi Arabian clerics want to evolve this institution.

Context of Old Stories of African American Muslims

In a post to the Immanent Frame (2011), Sylvia Chan-Malik captures one salient aspect of the problem in the continuing media charges of the "NOI's lack of compliance with 'Islam's Sunni orthodoxy." She found that this equivalence was "used to diffuse and discredit the NOI's critiques of state-sponsored racism and/or U.S. military aggression and intervention."¹ The number of texts on the Nation of Islam, the paucity of texts on other African American Muslim communities create a singular focus and thus creates a skewed history. The persistence of critiques of an American version of Islam versus the

¹ Chan-Malik, Sylvia. "Race, Orthodoxy and 'Real' Islam." *The Immanent Frame*. May 4, 2011.

Muslim world's Sunni Islamic presence exist alongside critiques of the world's Sunni Muslims and cries for an American Islam. This is quite a paradox since there is an American Islam that reflects an American experience rather than that of other cultures in the world.

This quandary highlights what Talal Asad and Saba Mahmoud see as "power to reorganize substantive features of religious life, stipulating what [Islam] is or ought to be assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices."² Though both of these scholars are speaking of the current crises in the Muslim world, the sentiments definitely apply to the contextual situation of African American Muslims. They have lived and sometimes prospered under the yoke of a hegemonic presentation of an American Islam by postcolonial migrants to the United States largely without the opportunity to invite representatives of global Islam to the already present Islam and its contours.

Sherman Jackson in Islam and the Blackamerican, Concurs

Blackamerican Muslims found themselves struggling to reconcile a dignified blackamerican existence with the super-tradition of historical Islam, on the one hand, against the presumed normativeness of a historically informed and culturally specific immigrant Islam on the other.³

When questions are asked about the legitimacy of persons acting in the name of being either Islamic or Muslim, the context must be an American one. In the Muslim world, 'what is Islam?' has been a question especially since occupations and colonizations have reconfigured its essence and contours. In America, religious community relationship to some authorized, legitimating body does not in practice work in the same way. The questions of which kinds of practices or specific beliefs are beyond an identifiable core are quintessential dilemmas in American religious history, as it has sought what in religious expression is deemed protected in the courts. For example, whether the Mormons can consider themselves Christian and be accepted by the general American public as representatives of Christianity is largely a non-question today since in America there are no formal regulations regarding religion and religious

associations or adherence. While there are religious associations to which like-dominations belong, the religious landscape of America remains denominational in many ways, and extends the boundaries of inclusion in many world religions to new contextual expressions. There are different questions in America than in the Muslim world.

On July 28, 2017 Abigail Hauslother reported on what she saw as the deterioration of an African American Muslim community in New Medinah, Mississippi as representative of the status of African American Muslims. "The stories of Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali have faded in the American memory."⁴ This journalist says that the African American participation in Islam has been "replaced by portrayals of Muslims as immigrants, people with foreign accents and ideologies."⁵ This journalist concludes that the relevance of African-American Islam, which she calls a sect, "is fading into the background." This assertion of the prospect of African American Islamic irrelevance is heard in many quarters and begs for investigation.

Ms. Hauslother ignores the fact that on June 16, 2016, the funeral of Muhammad Ali commanded the witness of five hundred thousand people lining the streets of Louisville, Kentucky in a 23-mile procession. 22,000 people attended the actual funeral with former President Bill Clinton delivering the eulogy. Muhammad Ali's resistance to the narratives written for African American Muslims, carrying the Olympic torch and contributions to charities and the spirit of the people ruled the day. How does this match with Ms. Hauslother's funeral rites for a variety of communities based on a visit to a small rural one?

Evidence of the failure of some small, rural and urban-located communities to thrive is indeed apparent. Some of this is directly attributed to changes in America's social and economic environment. But it also speaks to something else, there is an historical narrative conceived and perpetuated for African Americans. They are consigned to a space in America that will not be allowed to grow beyond that which is prescribed beyond a quasi-slave status. Nevertheless, some of the circumstances must be attributed to failures of leadership within communities. One imam describes the situation as an "inevitable demise of communities who postulated a

² Mahmoud, Saba. P.3

³ Jackson, p. 4.

⁴ Hauslother, Abigail. "In Mississippi, Aging Muslim Community Worries About Its Future." *Washington Post*. July 28, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

visible, viable physical Islamic presence into a context of abstract desires.” He went on to clarify, “many of these communities had germinating concepts that most citizens are permitted to attempt such as building small, successful communities with schools and industry built on the rhetoric of their leaders without plans to realize them.” There were several efforts to establish a sustainable physical presence of an American communal Islam that were not thought out for the long term of future generations as Amish or Mormons did for example.

The Stories

Simultaneously, there has been another pervasive narrative of the African American Muslim community, which embeds it in abject poverty, low educational attainment and deep intimacy with the American penal system. There is a need for research to see if this is actually the case. Nevertheless, highly educated leadership has spurred communities to thrive across the nation. These leaders have always engaged interreligious and intra-religious dialogue along with more targeted social work in African American and Hispanic communities. One highlighted community sits in Chicago where a Catholic priest, Father Pflieger, works diligently with various African American Muslim communities in his area on social issues. In many communities across the nation, Black religious leaders have banded together to resolve housing, health and education concerns.

In the United States, Islam settled in portions of newly formed communities of largely southern blacks in the North in the second decade of the 20th century. These communities are a contemporary narrative of a new faith tradition settling in various lived experiences of the horrific conditions of African Americans that still remain in the 21st century. The extracted Islamic focus for all groups was the Qur’anic emphasis on righteous living and striving for justice. Righteous living generally entails for example, avoidance of pork, alcohol, gambling, fornication and adultery; while embracing five times daily prayer, cleanliness of body and home, and positive speech (usually in pleasant greetings and friendly conversations). African American culture is not jettisoned in the transition to the faith of Islam. Families are composed still in the 21st century of various kinds of Christians, sometimes Buddhists, and even Black Jews. Interreligious living is a hallmark of everyday interactions. Experiences of racism and discrimination also inform every aspect of their lives and their understandings of the Qur’an.

Stories of the life of the Prophet Muhammad are culled for how he dealt with people of other faiths, pursued

justice and remedied situations of oppression. The Qur’an is read for spiritual upliftment, guidance and ethical exhortations. Using these readings as foundational, African American Muslims have positioned themselves in the larger African American community as a moral voice, champions of justice and models of an alternative lifestyle.

Christianity in the United States had organized the public space around Sunday as the day for worship. As a result, most businesses and places of entertainment were closed until after the hours of worship. This, of course, has changed over the last few decades, but Sunday remains the primary day of worship. The forms of communal faith interactions are like the forms of the Black Christian church with Sunday school classes and classes for adults along with Friday traditional Jum’ah prayer services. The context for this schedule of spiritual commune is the larger American Christian format which reserves Sunday for faith activities and to which most faith communities adhere. Also, typical of Christianity is the family worshipping together. Traditional Muslim cultures separate men and women and thus, it is individuals in a congregational manner who worship. African American Muslims, those not wrapped in foreign cultures, have chosen a hybrid. In many masjid, men and women are separated but not by walls or curtains, but by designated space. Women enter the same doors as men and children regardless of gender follow one or the other parent.

In the worship services themselves, there is the expectation of relevance to the present. Stories from the Qur’an and hadith literature is translated or rather modernized so that a lesson is formed which can be applied. Both genders often ask the Imam to cite what was used and get further clarification on what was said. Educated imams have traveled (and still do) to the Muslim world for varying lengths of time to learn Qur’anic Arabic and familiarized themselves with hadith literature. They then have to make the tradition meaningful/applicable as a faith tradition suited to an American audience.

The cultural capital and *habitus* as defined by Pierre Bourdieu of African-American Muslims in the general society are undeniable. The references to God and some of the practices of Islam embedded in hip hop, clothing and street talk are used across America further popularizing the language of Islam. Deploying approaches that use a multifaceted lens of investigation to explore African-American Muslims in the 21st century is appropriate. Simultaneously, the intersectionality of race, age, class and gender are necessary frames for any examination. Global Muslim scholars have asserted that the onus is on

American Muslims to master the language and references of the Arab Islamic world to be eligible to be considered bona fide Muslims even though most of the Muslim world does not speak or read Arabic.

While this is one point of view, I assert that it is the effort to understand the ethical foundation of the Qur'an itself rather than the legal or other interpretations of other Muslim geographies that form the *raison d'être* of African-American Muslims. The evidence for an ethical approach is found in some of the most obvious communal emphasis on right living away from the vices that are everywhere in the communities in which they live.

Similarly, in terms of approaches that must be used to explore the various communities of African American Muslims is the question of why the majority of them have chosen the larger ethical side of the Qur'an rather than the legal much smaller side. In this regard, two scholars, Ahmed Shahab and Cemil Aydin, whose focus is on setting the record straight about how Muslims in recent centuries have treated or not treated Islamic texts or Muslim communities with regard to methodological approaches and analysis of scholarship, provide critical information for the story of African-American Muslims. Cemil Aydin in *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* asserts, "... Because there was no central, church – like institution to bind Muslims, there was also no distinction between Orthodox and heterodox practice." He further asserts that, "interpretations of religious texts and practices differed in local languages and contexts."⁶ This is one organizing principle of an approach that is critical for understanding African American Islam. This fact however does not obscure that there is a core set of beliefs and practices that identify Islam. Those communities that don't adhere to the core set of beliefs and practices perhaps do not fall under the legal definition of Muslim but as Mormons can claim Christianity, but can claim Islam in America. They may have Islamic sensibilities but are certainly not 'hetero' or 'pseudo-.' Hetero and pseudo are pejorative adjectives used to discredit the religious beliefs of people whatever they are located.

Ahmed Shahab points out that in modern times Islamic law has been asserted as the arbiter of all that is Islam while ethical decision – making and seating has taken a backseat. He also examines what is obscured when calling disciplines and their artifacts 'Islamic' without espousing that anyone or any community could even aspire to this claim but does not reject it. As stated

⁶Aydin, Cemil. *The Idea of the Muslim World*,

before, African-American Muslims generally engage the ethical thrust of the ethos of the Qur'an as opposed to legal thrust applied to it. The ethical thrusts, not the law, have particularly been attractive to African American men and women.

Using these two leads, the fluidity (the movement between communities) that is one hallmark of the African American Muslim community, is not lost. Though, many believers belong to one community, there is not a great deal of hesitation in participating in classes or events hosted by another. Within families, members may even belong to different communities. Believing families may evolve to an entirely different community that has a different faith position such as a "Sunni" family transitioning to a Shia community. Those moves signal not only the fluidity of the community but also some choices about understandings of Islamic history and spirituality. Most of the investigations on African American Muslims have been biographies on *The Nation of Islam*. While researches must turn their focus to other communities, ideologies and positions in American society, they cannot leave out women, using the proposed approaches.

African American Muslim women are at the forefront of this conversation, which has been descriptively much about men. Few texts explore the lived experience of women in any of its aspects. Black feminism as a 'critical theoretical orientation' with its focus on the concept of intersectionality provides an important tool for this investigation. Intersectionality describes the inseparable nature of the multiple oppressions – class, race, sexuality, gender, age, etc. -, and I add standards of femininity and beauty in now Muslim communities. This is the intersection where African American Muslim women live. Yet, even though the intersection is crowded, there is also a firm commitment to their life-choice of Islam as their spiritual, social, physical and even psychological angles of view.

Proponents have been talking about the term, 'intersectionality' though unnamed for decades – since the late 1960s through the works of bell hooks, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Williams and others. Recently, black feminists are challenging other feminist and subaltern theorists over the right and the necessity of preserving their own unique space for women of color. Regarding African American Muslim women, the focus has largely been on dress, marriage, their relations with other American Muslim women, specifically on whether they belonged to the Nation of Islam or questions about their transition to Islam.

These women have grown up with all of the trends and fantasies of feminism. They have also been in resistance to some of its forms of Islamic practices coming from other cultures that further oppress them and their bodies. Many of the approaches of subaltern approaches are unknown in the Black community and many of their conclusions do not apply.

African-American Muslim women, especially in the second and third generations have grown up in the various narratives on feminism while participating in variously segregated religious and racial communities, fighting the issues of class, gender and age discriminations. The feminist gaze on American Muslim women has largely focused on women's scarves, lives of abuse and denial of spiritual autonomy. For African American Muslim women, life has been what Amina Wadud calls another 'gender jihad' with many aspects from women who have centuries of fighting many wars, putting their bodies on the line.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of educated women across generations are forming alliances and collectives across religious communities and with women in other ethnic communities leading the way to respond to many pressing social issues. Generations of women, who are the face of Islam in America, have inherited the activist genes of the struggles for emancipation, civil rights, and black power movements. For many African-American women, second-class participation in the

religion of Islam is totally unacceptable. These conversations increasingly include the concerns around domestic violence, polygyny and lack of opportunity for leadership roles. Some of the women are hip hop and spoken word artists, performers in poetry slams, and musicians along with being educators, journalists, lawyers and judges. For professional women, there are dual sets of identities. In one space, usually a coeducational space, they have professional authority and in another space, there is the expectation of gender submission coming from representatives of global Islam. The extent of these activities needs to be explored. Women's professionalism exists alongside increasing demands by males for women to engage polygyny and/or provide for men.

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What has been offered here is a potential set of approaches to reveal a more accurate picture of African American Muslims. Hopefully, researchers will take up the challenge.

