

ISLAM IN AMERICA: THE GREAT MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Muhammad Vohra and Sana Chaudhry
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The Great Migration

Muslims have a long history in America which dates back to the arrival of slaves.

Following this period, there was a boom of African American conversion to Islam in the 1950s and 1960s in the heart of the Civil Rights Era. This paper will demonstrate how African Americans paved the way for all Muslim Americans and how the struggles Muslim Americans are going through right now are similar to the struggles of their American ancestral counterparts. Firstly, we will give an account of the history of African American Muslims and of all of the things they accomplished and brought to American History. Then, we will discuss the intersection of contemporary “native” Muslims and African American Muslims. Finally, we will talk about the community project the Muslim Student Association of the University of Houston did to reach out to local African American communities and the significance of it.

Muslim history in America can be traced all the way back to slavery and the impacts of those early Muslims is evident in even our society today. At a minimum, 10% of African Slaves came from Islamic backgrounds. Many of the slave owners saw Islam as an affront to Christian beliefs and forced conversion amongst Muslim slaves. This led to practices and religious ceremonies being held in secret and traditional clothing worn sparsely. Many of the original Muslims had to change cultural practices and names to avoid persecution. Some African Americans in Georgia managed to maintain their faith all the way up to the 20th Century.¹ Over time and generations Islam was an ancestral religion and something highly associated with the African homeland. When African Americans were freed from slavery and started the Great Migration to the North, they started researching more and more about the religious past of

¹ PBS *Islam in America* (PBS Publication 2010)

their ancestors. Many of them felt disenchanting and wrong by being Christians as that was the religion that was forcibly imposed upon their ancestors. As PBS puts it, “the Great Migration of blacks to the North helped encourage the African-American Islamic revival and the growth of the African-American Muslim Nationalist Movement that still exists to this day.” The arrival of early African Muslim slaves was integral to the Muslim Nationalist movement that came later. Having somewhere to look back and pull culture from set the groundwork for a huge part of the Civil Rights movement.

The Nation of Islam was the next resurgence of Islam in America and cemented the way, for not just African American Muslims, but for all American Muslims. The Great Migration, as Wilkerson mentions throughout her book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, gave hope to African Americans of an escape from the blatant racism they faced in the Jim Crow south.² But upon reaching the north, to their dismay, they faced different types of racism and there seemed to be no escape. The Nation of Islam gave a way for African Americans to feel proud of themselves in a world that told them they had no reason to be proud. It was characterized as a violent movement but the Nation saw itself as using self-defense methods. This movement gained widespread popularity because of the pride and honor it brought to African Americans. They felt this pride and honor not only because they were able to be themselves, but also because they felt that Islam was their true ancestral religion.³ Warith Deen Muhammad, son of the longtime leader of the Nation of Islam, led the conversion of the NOI to mainstream orthodox Sunni Islam in the late 1970s. He proceeded to build mosques and other Islamic spaces in America. Many of these spaces still stand today and paved the way for the Muslim immigrants

² Isabel Wilkerson *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Random House 2010)

³ Malcolm X with Alex Haley *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Grove Press 1965)

from the Middle East and South Asia to feel comfortable in this country. That wouldn't have been possible without the African American effort.⁴

Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslims in America have many trials ahead in America which have been made easier by the long-lasting impact of African American Muslims and can be made even easier by strengthening the ties between the two communities. What American Muslims are going through currently is nothing compared to the centuries of systematic oppression and racism that African Americans have went through. Both communities have unique things to offer to each other. The current Middle Eastern/South Asian Muslim American population can learn from the history of African Americans how to get political change done. The decades leading up to and after the Civil Rights Movement are a testament to the sheer power of people who are hungry for equal treatment and representation. Through these lessons, Muslims can also learn and have a seat at the discussion table. African Americans, on the other hand, can gain a global partner in the fight against racism and oppression through the arrival of these new Muslims. The Islamic Council of North America, one of the largest Western Islamic Organizations, is a strong supporter of Black Lives Matter and other movements against structural African American oppression. With these new Muslims, the African Americans gain invaluable allies.⁵

In light of all of this, we decided to host an event that brought these two communities together. We decided to do an event with Project Row Houses. We picked Project Row Houses because they are a, "catalyst for transforming community through the celebration of art and African-American history and culture." This organization was perfect for our goals because it

⁴ Don Terry W. *Deen Mohammed: A Leap of Faith* (Hartford Courant 2002)

⁵ Alt Muslimah *American Muslims on Black Lives Matter & anti-racism* (ICNA 2015)

celebrates the history and art of African Americans and thus empowering them. Both of us are officers of the University of Houston Muslim Student Association and we decided to create an event where we would go out one day and volunteer for this organization. On the day itself, we had an amazing time helping Project Row Housing with painting, scraping, gardening, and cleaning. The work was hard and tiring but even more rewarding. We had amazing conversations with the people who worked there about all of the fantastic things they do for the community. Many of our members left having gained a better appreciation and understanding of African American struggles. Then, in the same month, we did a panel of African American Muslims who used to be part of the Nation of Islam to talk about their experiences and stories. This event was also enlightening and amazing as we had the opportunity to see the history through the eyes of someone who lived it. One of the panel members personally knew Warith Deen Muhammad and worked with him in the 90s. The members on the panels heavily encouraged the unification of these two communities and gave us action items to do. Some of the action items were: read more African American authorship, go to contemporary civil rights protests, work in conjunction with African American communities on volunteer projects. These events are the first step in a long journey to a better future. For this project, Muhammad contributed to the research paper and Sana contributed to the creative part. However, we helped each other when we struggled.

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