

Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem

Zain Abdullah

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Black Mecca undoubtedly is a new contribution to the literature on Islam in America. It contributes to a better understanding of African Muslim immigrants in the United States. Only a few books have been published on African immigrants in the United States, and *Black Mecca* definitely adds a new dimension to the discussions of African immigrant roles in the United States and to Islamic thought in general.

This work will allow readers to recognize that West African Muslims are not just earning income in the United States; they are actually contributing to the development of Harlem in New York. Often times, many immigrants would reside in low-class residences until they become affluent,

then they would leave the area. These African Muslims consider Harlem their home; they have turned it into a thriving business area; they reside there and develop it by building schools and mosques for their community.

This work contains nine chapters, an index, a glossary, a bibliography and twenty black-and-white photos. In chapter one, Abdullah describes his approach and the methodology he employs as an ethnographer. He asserts the great connection between African music and the blues in Black American music and how Harlem becomes a connecting point for both Africans and Blacks. He illustrates the influence of West African immigrants in reshaping the landscape of Harlem economically, socially and culturally. Abdullah asserts that his primary goal “is to use story to convey deeper understanding of African Muslims in Harlem” (9). Hence, in each chapter, he narrates interesting real stories to buttress his claims. This narrative keeps his presentation fascinating and appealing to his readers. By the end of this book, one would recognize that Harlem is truly “a little Mecca” for African Muslims. As Muslims yearn to fulfill their religious obligations by performing Hajj at Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the African Muslims sacrifice whatever they can to reach America to fulfill their economic aspirations. This is why Abdullah refers to the United States as the “Black Mecca” for the Africans.

Abdullah describes in chapter two his visit to Elizabeth Prison in New Jersey where he heard courageous stories of the survival of West African Muslims during their voyage to the assumed “honey land” of America in search of better life. Even though these immigrants relentlessly searched for material gain, their families at home were so concerned about their children’s commitment to the religion of Islam. In chapter three, the author explains the cultural differences between the Africans and the Blacks and the role of self identity among them. Instead of seeing their relationship with one another as complementary, they witness competition and unhealthy suspicion; they misread one another’s intention, which at times, lead to lack of respect for one another. Abdullah then analyzes in chapter four the difficult environment, which African Muslim immigrants encounter in Harlem due to an inability to speak fluent English. He cites many cases about the negative consequences and the fear it generates among them. They initially pay a heavy price for their inability to speak good English. As a result, they lose their rights, fail to make enough profit from their businesses, or to benefit from the resources available to them. Eventually, they learn English and improve their lots.

In chapter five, Abdullah describes his attending the social and religious ceremonies of Ahmadou Bamba’s day in New York. It was a festive and remarkable occasion where religion and politics intertwined. Observ

ers have mix feelings about it. While many admired it, a few resented it and considered it intrusive in American culture. However, the paraders expressed great excitement for the parade because it placed them within the Harlem cultural atmosphere. In addition, at Harlem, Africans struggle continuously to work at their businesses despite all odds. They are “able to manage their lifestyle changes, adjust to new inter-group relationship, and withstand a large system of racial hierarchy, immigrant scape-goating and a Muslim backlash” (155). This is what Abdullah labels as “Harlem Jihad” in chapter six. Further, in chapter seven, he portrays with stories of their life experiences different forms of sacrifices that African Muslims go through. They consider their commitment to helping one another a religious service (khidmah) and hold on to their Islamic beliefs as a form of sacrifice and service to God and to their community. They commit themselves to hard work, selflessness support to one another, and assisting their families back home. As Abdullah points out in chapter eight, the most important and cherished values among these Africans is maintaining a good family and a sense of community wherever they reside. The African concept of family is broader in scope than the narrow concept of family in the West. The African understanding of family includes all relatives as well as members of one’s community.

In the last chapter, Abdullah admires the great hope which drives African Muslims to struggle at all cost to achieve their economical goals. They give no room for despair; they believe that any obstacle can be overcome with patience, perseverance, and relying on faith during a time of crisis. This hope, Abdullah asserts, “provides them enough strength to survive and withstand all odds of life without despair or being destroyed” (232). Abdullah adds that the presence of African Muslims in Harlem has changed the American worldview about African Muslims forever. African perceptions of America have also changed. African Muslims believe very strongly that their life is better off in the the United States as long as they continue to struggle and adapt to their new environment, their new Mecca.

The work is free of jargon, and the prose is readable for different levels of readers. While many writers look only into the religious aspects of the immigrants, the author ventures into both the religious and economic contributions of the African Muslims with a special focus on how they maintain their ethnic and religious identities while living in the melting pot of America.

The *Black Mecca* is a must-read book for any scholar dealing with issues, roles, and the contributions of Muslim immigrants in the United States.

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