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Islam and the Moral Arc of the Universe

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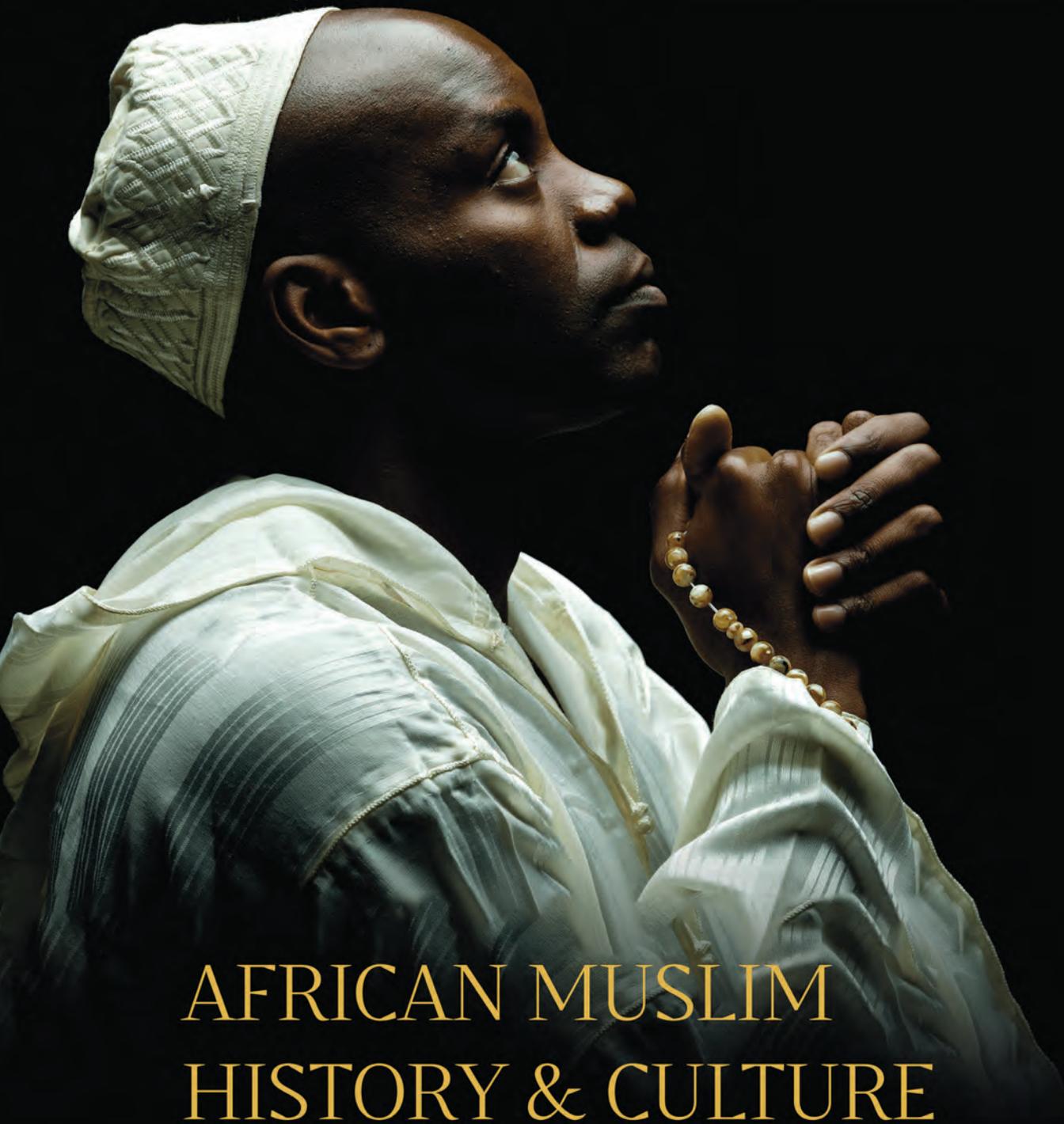
African American Muslims

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Omnipresent: The Existence of Islam Throughout American History

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Honoring Islamic Art Heritage in the United States of America During  
Black History Month



# AFRICAN MUSLIM HISTORY & CULTURE



As Black History Month is observed, Islam reminds people that it was Prophet Muhammad who was the first in the records of world history to declare equality among human beings more than 1,400 years ago. "



# Contents

Volume 51 | Issue 2

<b>1. Activities in Review</b>	
Key Events for the Muslim World League .....	4
<b>2. Letter from the Editor</b> .....	6
<b>3. Editorial Leader</b>	
Islam and the Moral Arc of the Universe .....	7
<b>4. Feature Essays</b>	
African American Muslims .....	10
African Muslims Across the World .....	13
<b>5. Historical Essays</b>	
Omnipresent: The Existence of Islam Throughout American History .....	16
A Timeline of Islam in Africa .....	19
Bilal ibn Rabah: Black Icon, First Muezzin and Leader of the Faithful .....	22
Omar bin Sayyid: Islamic Scholar .....	25
<b>6. Cultural Essays</b>	
Honoring Islamic Art Heritage in the United States of America During Black History Month .....	27

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# Muslim World League

## Recent Activities in Review



The Muslim World League announced the launch of a new exhibition at Expo 2020 Dubai titled "Prophets As If You See Them." The exhibit introduces guests to 25 prophets and messengers (PBUT) who are mentioned in the Quran by presenting their biographies through the latest technologies.

Dr. Al-Issa hosted the Ambassador of the Kingdom of The Netherlands to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ms. Janet Alberda, and the First Secretary for Political Affairs of The Netherlands, Mr. Baudwein Dijkmann.



Dr. Al-Issa met with the Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Dr. Abdul Aziz Ahmad.



Dr. Al-Issa hosted the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Malaysia to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Dato' Abd Razak Abdul Wahab.

January 17



January 20

Secretary General Dr. Al-Issa accepted an official invitation to participate in the World Economic Forum in Davos from Mr. Klaus Schwab, the Executive Chairman of the Forum, and Mr. Borge Brende, President of the Forum.

Convoys from the Muslim World League assisted Syrian refugees and others amid severe weather and cold temperatures in region.

January 26



January 27

Dr. Al-Issa met with the Ambassador of the Republic of Gabon to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, H.E. Guy Ibrahim Mamborou, who expressed his appreciation for the Muslim World League's humanitarian initiatives.



February is black History Month in the United States, a month set aside to remember and celebrate the story of African Americans—their suffering and struggles, but also their triumphs and contributions. Long overlooked in traditional study of American history, the African American saga has been researched aggressively by scholars and writers over the last several decades. Long-buried stories have been uncovered, new stories have been discovered, and all Americans have a greater appreciation for the essential part Americans of African descent have played in their country's political, economic and cultural life since the first enslaved Africans arrived in 1619.

In the mind of most Americans, Islam is usually associated with immigrants who arrived in the United States in the twentieth century. These immigrants were part of a vast migration from parts of the Ottoman Empire to the Americas. People from what are now Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq settled in the New World from Canada to Argentina. The vast majority were Christians, but the Muslim minority established the first mosques in the United States.

In the 1930s, a new expression of Islam arrived in the movement known as The Nation of Islam, a movement that was at the same time religious and political. Founded by Elijah Robert Poole, who took the name Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam advocated black empowerment through separation from white America while the mainstream civil rights movement was advocating integration. The Nation of Islam courted controversy and inspired suspicion

and fear in the American body politic, even as it attracted notable adherents such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. For many years, this home-grown expression of Islam, which was often condemned as heretical by Muslim leaders, was the most visible expression of Islam in the United States.

Yet Islam had first touched American shores some 300 years ago with the arrival of enslaved people from West Africa, many of whom were Muslim. Most of these people initially maintained their faith through their enslavement, but eventually they or their descendants would convert to Christianity. In a sense, The Nation of Islam attempted to reconnect its adherents to the faith of the ancestors of many African Americans. Indeed, as Black Americans sought a more genuine connection with their African heritage, many took African and Muslim names to replace their English names or the surnames that had been passed down from the days when their ancestors were simply given the surnames of slave owners. Today, some traditionally Muslim names are fully mainstreamed among African Americans, whether they are Muslim or not.

Islam is still very much a religion of recent immigrants to the United States, but its deep connection with African Americans, from their arrival up to today, makes it very much a topic to be discussed and researched during Black History Month and throughout the year. We are pleased to raise the curtain on that discussion in this issue.

### **The Editors**





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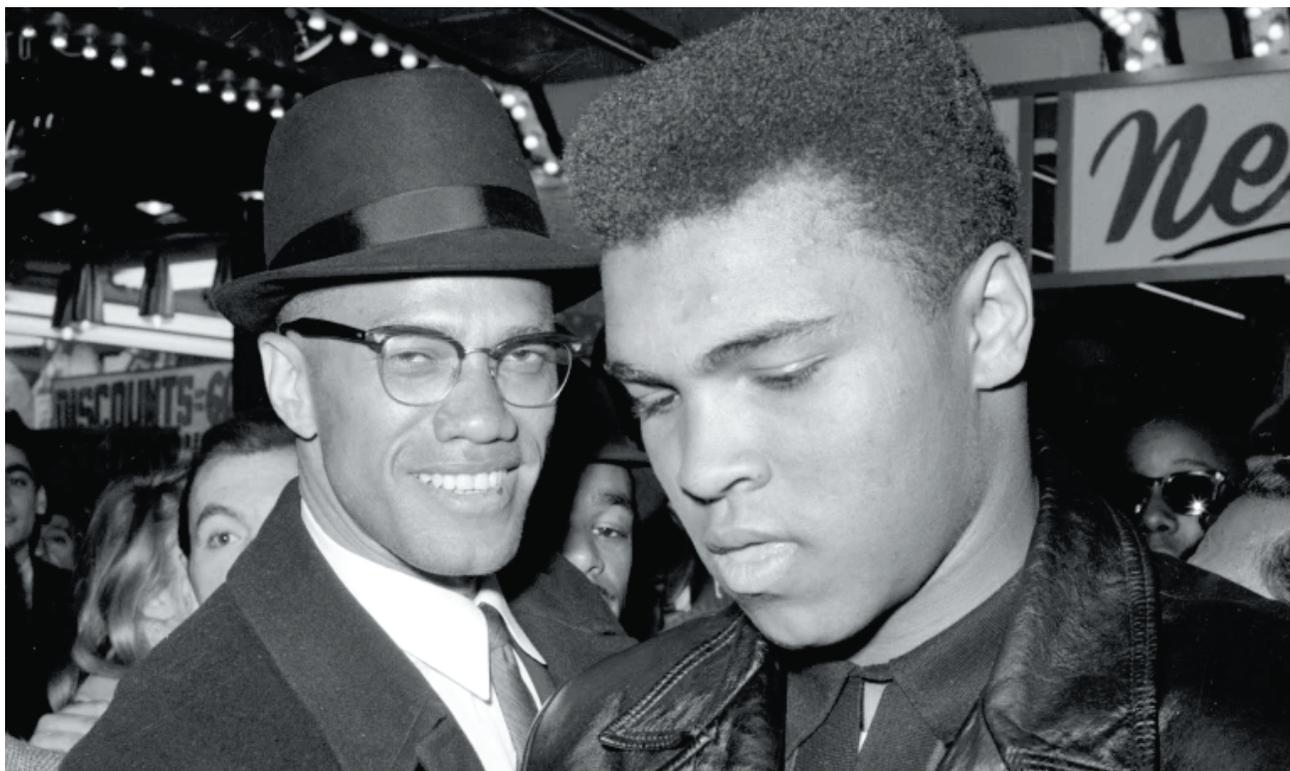
Muhammad Ali prays with Muslim youth in Sudan

## Islam and the Moral Arc of the Universe

Islam has long played a central role in empowering African Americans in the United States. During Black History Month, we celebrate the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King and modern civil rights leaders. The story of Islam's role in fighting against injustice and fostering freedom began even earlier in America.

In 1831, Fula Islamic scholar and writer Omar ibn Said was taken forcibly from present-day Senegal to the United States and enslaved

for the remainder of his life. He continued to write while he was enslaved. In addition to works on theology, he wrote an autobiography praising Prophet Muhammad and Islam while also expressing his tolerance toward other God-fearing people. His autobiography began with the 67th chapter of the Holy Quran, the Al-Mulk, which emphasizes that no individual can impose his will on another, and that only God has sovereignty over human beings. It is no exaggeration to say that Islam



**Muhammad Ali and Malcom**

sustained him, and while he did not regain his freedom in his lifetime, his work was acquired by the Library of Congress in 2017 and is preserved in perpetuity to commemorate his struggle. He died in North Carolina in 1864 at the age of 94.

Almost one hundred years later, Islam would give strength to two leaders who need no introduction today, Malcom X and Muhammad Ali. After Malcom X completed the Hajj, he wrote a letter describing the transformative experience of circling the Kaaba with believers around the world from every station and nation. He wrote, "...in the Muslim World, when one accepts Islam and ceases to be white or Negro, Islam recognizes all men as Men because the people here in Arabia believe that God is One, they believe that all people are also One, and that all our brothers and sisters is One Human Family." At a time when African Americans were struggling to realize their human rights in America, Islam

provided a spiritual foundation for equality that proved immensely powerful when paired with the political dispossession of the African American community.

Growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, Muhammad Ali's character was forged in an environment of tremendous racism and inequity. Boxing was controlled by unscrupulous racketeers, and established business practices for emerging fighters were nonexistent. In this environment, Muhammad Ali was attracted to Islam's emphasis on morality, tolerance, and above all equality in the eyes of God. His conversion to Islam created a political storm in the United States. The Nation of Islam advocated separation over integration, and Ali rejected the model of modest behavior for a Black world champion fighter established by Joe Louis. He spoke his mind on everything from domestic civil rights to the war in Vietnam, leveraging his celebrity for the wider advancement of African American rights.

He even sacrificing his prime fighting years locked in a political battle with the U.S. government over his refusal to be drafted into the military during the Vietnam war. While he struggled at times with both the ideology and expectations of the Nation of Islam and mankind's failure to live by divinely inspired ideals, his faith in God and Islam never wavered throughout his lifetime.

Prophet Muhammad said over a millennium ago, "A white has no superiority over a black, nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action," emphasizing the moral foundation within Islam that it is character and deeds before God that matter. This was revolutionary compared to the norms of pre-Islamic Arabia. The Holy Quran states that evidence of God on earth can be found "in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors," a clear message of embrace toward diversity. Throughout American history, Islam has provided support to African Americans, first to slaves and abolitionists and then to civil rights leaders, supporting them in times of need and against all odds, but most of all serving as a force for the broader societal good and the advancement of civil and human rights.

The Muslim World League began educational outreach with the African American community in the United States in 1978. Amid fierce segregation in educational opportunity, the MWL invited African Americans to join take advantage of overseas scholarships and residencies throughout the Islamic world to further their education and find inspiration for their struggle at home. Islam and the MWL have been a source of support for African Americans and the advancement of civil rights throughout American history, and we remain committed to realizing the dream envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King. Under God, and together, we can shorten the moral arc of the universe.



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**Malcom X during his performance of Hajj.**



# African American Muslims

To be a Black Muslim in the United States today is to be a double minority, both in terms of race and religious belief. African

with global immigration from other Black Islamic regions of the world, African American Muslims' numbers have steadily grown, as have the challenges that face them.

Today, about one-fifth of all American Muslims, some 2,000,000 people, and half are converts to Islam. African American Muslims began converting to Islam in the 1930s with the founding of the Nation of Islam. Today, only about 2% of Black Muslims align themselves with the Nation of Islam, while 52% follow the Sunni branch and 27% identify with no specific Islamic denomination. According to an Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) 2018 survey, 66% of Muslims who identify as Black or African American and 75% of Black Americans in the general public report experiencing racial discrimination.

These numbers help show that the history of Islam in the African American community has been one of continuous transition and challenges. Following the September 11th attacks, Islamophobia reached unprecedented heights, with a 1700% increase in hate crimes against the group as some Americans blamed all Muslims for the actions of a few extremists. Additionally, over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Civil Rights movement has come in and out of the spotlight. From the 1960's Civil Rights Movement to the recent killing of George Floyd, Black Muslims have found themselves in the midst of both racial and religious strife, and they continue to fight for equality and acceptance in the United States.



**The Muslim Alliance in North America has been addressing the religious, social, and economic problems that face American Muslims today.**

American Muslims are part of the most ethnically diverse faith in the United States. Despite the increase in the American Muslim population over the last 50 years, however, Islam is no stranger to the United States. The Muslim faith has American roots dating back to the initial colonization of the United States due to the presence of Muslim slaves hailing from Western and Northern Africa. From these roots along



African American Muslims began converting to Islam in the 1930s with the founding of the Nation of Islam. ”

Many prominent Black Muslims have made their mark in the relatively short history of the United States. As mentioned in our editorial leader, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali stand out as major names of the recent past, but there are many more influential Black Muslims in the country today.

Performing artists like Akon, Janet Jackson, and Yasiin Bey (Mos Def) all bring their versions of Islamic faith into the world of music, believing that music offers a path to Um-mah. Muslim-American women like Ibtihaj Muhammad and Halima Aden have become role models for young female Muslim-Americans in the U.S. by shattering both female and Muslim stereotypes in sports and fashion, respectively.

Ibtihaj was the first Muslim-American to earn a medal at the Olympics while also being the first to compete for the U.S. with a Hijab in fencing. Halima shows that beauty and traditional, conservative dress can go hand in hand. As the first model to wear a hijab and burkini in the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition*, she opened the door for more females to represent their faith in the fashion world. She also appeared on multiple covers of Vogue magazine promoting

modest fashion.

Besides individual inspiration, the African America Muslim community has evolved tremendously over the past few decades with more initiatives to integrate Black Muslims, provide opportunities, and push for acceptance.

Current organizations such as Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA) and Project Downtown are two such examples. MANA focuses particularly on African American Muslims, but also seeks to unify all Muslim organizations in North America. Their mission is “to address issues and concerns—social, economic, and religious—that are specific to that community, as well as those that affect American society in general.” Project Downtown was created by a group of Muslim students at the University of Miami and seeks to act within the charitable pillar of Islam. By offering food and conversation to all people in need regardless of faith, Project Downtown not only strengthens the African American Muslim community but also the entire nation.

As the Charter of Makkah states, “Religious and cultural diversity never justifies conflict. Humanity needs positive, civilized partnerships and effective interaction. Diversity must be a bridge to dialogue, understanding and cooperation for the benefit of all humanity.” It is thanks to the passion of individuals and organizations like these that the African American Muslim community in the United States is able to continue to grow, give back, and pursue cooperation for all humanity.



## African American Muslim Athlete Spotlight:

# Ibtihaj Muhammad

Ibtihaj Muhammad has become much more than a female American-Muslim athlete. Her success in Olympic fencing gave her a platform that she has used to continue to strive for Muslim and female understanding and acceptance. She has been named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in the world for her activism for equality and the importance of sports. Ibtihaj has also become the model for a doll in the Barbie "Shero" (a portmanteau of "she" and "hero") line, a doll line begun in 2015 to honor women who have broken barriers to accomplish great things. She called her designation as a "shero" a proud

moment for Muslim girls everywhere. "I'm proud to know that little girls everywhere can now play with a Barbie who chooses to wear a hijab! This is a childhood dream come true." Additionally, her book "The Proudest Blue" became an instant The New York Times Bestseller. These successes only amplify Ibtihaj's voice for female Muslims around the world. In the United States, where Islamophobia and racism have not been eradicated, she has been able to start tearing down the walls that stand between Muslim communities and understanding.



**Ibtihaj Muhammad poses with the barbie that was modeled after herself.**



In the U.S., African Muslims constitute 20% of all the Muslims in the country.

# African Muslims Across the World

If you think of the Middle East when you think of the Muslim population, you are right, but only partially. There are 1.6 billion Islamic believers in all parts of the world. African Muslims make up a significant part of this community of believers whether they reside in Africa, the U.S., Europe, or Asia.

Islam is the world's second-largest religion after Christianity. According to Pew Research Center, there were 1.6 billion Muslims located across the globe in 2010. In fact, the spread of Islam spans 1,400 years and is the result of Islamic conquests, migrations, and commerce. Pew Research points out that about 62% of Muslims live in Asia-Pacific, with 344 million residing in India and Pakistan. That's more than in the entire Middle East and North Africa region (317 million).

## ASIA-PACIFIC

The Asia-Pacific region is also home to African Muslims. The largest Muslim ethnic group in this region is the *Siddi* (also known as the *Sheedi*, *Sidi*, *Siddhi*, or *Habshi*). Its members came mainly from Southeast Africa and descend from the Bantu people. The first Siddis arrived at the Bharuch port in India in the 7th century. Other groups followed with the first Arab Islamic invasions of the subcontinent in the 8th century. Over the years, the Siddi communities grew as enslaved people were brought to the region by the Portuguese and the British. The current Siddi community is estimated at around 60,000. They live in Karnataka, Gujarat and Hyderabad in India, and Makran and Karachi in Pakistan.

## AFRICA

Islam arrived in Africa from Asia in the 7th century. Today, nearly one-third of the total Muslim population in the world can be found on the African continent. The nature of African Islam is dynamic and complex, as it has been repeatedly redefined by changing social, political, and economic evolution. The African



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**Nigeria is the most populous Muslim country in West Africa.**

regions most abundant in Muslim communities are the Horn of Africa, a vast part of West Africa, North Africa, and the Swahili Coast. The Muslim-dominant countries include Mauritania, Somalia, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Comoros, Mayotte, Sudan, Libya and Senegal. The majority of Muslims in the African diaspora are Sunni believers who identify with the “five pillars of practice”: the declaration of faith, daily prayer, fasting during Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, and alms for the poor. The future of Muslims in Africa is bright. According to Pew Research, the population is projected to grow by nearly 60% in the next few years, to 385.9 million in 2030.

### WEST END EAST AFRICA

West Africa is the only sub-Saharan region on the continent where Islam dominates. Moreover, Pew Research observes that Islam’s popularity is growing. Its spread will increase by 60% in the coming years, reaching about 257 million in 2030. Nigeria is the most populous Muslim country in this region, and its Islamic population is also expected to grow to 116.8 million by 2030, marking the most significant projected increase in the area. The country with the second-largest Muslim growth is Niger. Muslim population in East Africa includes countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. According to Pew Research Center, the projected growth of local Black Muslim communities will increase there to 109.5 million in 2030.

### THE UNITED STATES

Another group of African Muslims can be found in the United States. Although they are not among the largest religious groups, they constitute 20% of all the Muslims in the country. They live predominantly in industrial areas. American cities with large populations of African American Muslims include Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Newark, Washington and Atlanta.



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**The African population is projected to grow by nearly 60% in the next years to 385.9 million in 2030.**

The history of African Muslims in America is related to the history of Black Americans in general and therefore dates back to the Revolutionary and Antebellum times. The oldest grassroots Black Muslim movement in America is the Nation of Islam, founded by Wallace Fard Muhammad in 1930. For numerous African Muslims, including prominent figures such as Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and Imam W. Deen Mohammed, the Nation of Islam was the first interaction with Islam, and the only became familiar with other Islamic traditions later in life. Currently, the Nation of Islam group is internally ambiguous and often breaks away from the Islamic tradition.

## EUROPE

Black Muslims also inhabit the European continent. They first came to the Iberian Peninsula from Arab countries and North Africa to rule over the region. Muslims in Spain were called Moors, a term derived from the Latin word *Maurus* that was initially used to describe

people from ancient Mauretania. Over time, it was applied to Muslims living in Europe in general. It included those traveling to Italy from Africa in the fifteenth century to work as servants for local wealthy families.

In today's Great Britain, there are diverse Black Muslim communities of Caribbean backgrounds. They comprise 10.1 % of the local Muslim population. African Muslims also currently live in France, where the vast majority of Muslims (82%) trace their origins to the Maghrebi region (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia). Other groups came from sub-Saharan Africa and Turkey.

Although commonly associated with the Middle East, Muslims widely inhabit many other parts of the world. Black African Muslims, who account for many global believers, contribute to Islam's position as the second-largest religion globally. With their testimony of faith, African Muslims raise awareness of the vital role of blackness in Islam.



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Following America's founding, the vast majority of Muslims were not citizens but slaves.

# Omnipresent: The Existence of Islam Throughout American History

The religion of Islam is inherently intertwined within the history of the United States. Islam and Muslims have been present since America's earliest days. Today, experts, researchers, and religious scholars can only estimate historical data regarding early Muslim Americans, but they know that Islam has always been in the United States and continues to grow to this day. Here is a brief overview of Islam throughout American history.

Dating back to the 18th century, the most apparent role of Islam during America's establishment was in the words and actions of the Founding Fathers, who sought to establish religious liberty, which included Islam. According to historian James Hutson, the chief of the Manuscript Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson, while campaigning for religious freedom in Virginia, demanded recognition of religious liberties "of the 'Mahamdan,'



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**Shortly after the Civil War and Reconstruction era, millions of immigrants began flooding into America, including tens of thousands from Muslim-majority countries.**

the 'Jew,' and the 'pagan.'" In the earliest days of American history, the "Mahamdans," or the "Mohammedans (term for a follower of Prophet Muhammad that is incorrect)" followers of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), were considered and included in the Founding Fathers' blueprint of their future country.

Following the establishment of the United States, the vast majority of Muslims were not citizens but slaves. Researchers and historians disagree on the exact number, but anywhere between 10% and 20% of enslaved persons were Muslim. Scholar Richard Brent Turner, author of "African Muslim Slaves and Islam in Antebellum America," explains that researchers' estimates range from 40,000 Muslim slaves in the United States to 3 million Muslim slaves across North and South America and the Caribbean.

The majority of U.S. slave owners demanded that their slaves adapt to their new life shortly upon their forced arrival, resulting in many Muslim slaves converting to Christianity, either willingly or forcefully. By the beginning of the 20th century, following the full emancipation of slaves, Islam had virtually disappeared due to these forced religious conversions. Despite the Founding Fathers' intention to instill religious freedom in America, slaves were not considered American citizens at the time and did not enjoy the same rights as free people.

Shortly after the Civil War and Reconstruction era, millions of immigrants began flooding into America, which included tens of thousands from Muslim-majority countries. The Industrial Revolution had begun, and many immigrants sought out the promise of economic stability

in America. Christian and Muslim immigrants from Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon made America their new home, thus reintroducing the religion of Islam to the United States.

While life in America was not all that was promised or hoped for, as many immigrants faced discrimination and prejudice, Islamic communities began to form around the country. By 1920, Arab immigrants created their own pockets of American society in cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Michigan City, Indiana. Mosques began popping up all over the Midwest and along the East Coast.

Also, during the first two decades of the 20th century, black Americans began to embrace Islam in response to the racism they experienced during the Great Migration, when disenfranchised southern Blacks moved to industrial regions in the North. This was largely due to the idea that the superiority of one race over another directly contradicts the teachings of Islam, which resulted in many Black Americans viewing the religion as one of liberation. Many Islamic organizations, including Sunni and Shiite institutions, as well as the Moorish Science Temple of America, were established, and Islam began to spread across the country.

Islam's growth was soon halted when the U.S. Congress passed the National Origins Act, more commonly known as the Asian Exclusion Act, in 1924. This new law restricted immigration from Asian countries, including many Muslim-majority countries, stemming the influx of new Muslim immigrants.

It wasn't until World War II, when Americans of varying ethnicities and religions fought alongside each other, that we saw the emergence of a new national identity – one that did not draw a line between the color of one's skin nor their beliefs. However, many soldiers returned home from the war to discover that most American

citizens did not embrace this new identity. In fact, racism expanded and segregation laws were enforced across much of the United States. African Americans and Muslims alike, especially African American Muslims, began to fight for equality and freedom, which many

historians believe arose from shared experiences during and after World War II.

Quickly, Islam began to play an integral role in the Civil Rights movement, which attracted more Americans to convert to Islam and resulted in a flourishing growth.

It wasn't until the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which reformed immigration laws and rescinded the Asian Exclusion Act, that a new wave of growth began. The new immigration laws resulted in more than a million new Muslim immigrants moving to America, drastically expanding Islam throughout the country before the end of the 20th century.

Ever since, Islam has been one of the fastest-growing religions in the United States. This can largely be attributed to Islam historically being a religion of peace, a means of liberation and solace for the persecuted, and a voice of harmony and unity for all, throughout American history.



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The Sahaba Shrine in Massawa, Eritrea. It is located in the port area on Massawa Island and it is told to be the first mosque in Africa.

## A Timeline of Islam in Africa

The presence of Islam in Africa can be traced to the 7th century CE. Faced with persecution from the Makkans in Makkah, the Prophet Muhammad advised a group of his early disciples to flee to Aksum across the Red Sea in **615 Common Era (CE)**. In the Muslim tradition, this initial migration is known as the *first hijrah*. The group was composed of twenty-three Muslims who arrived in Abyssinia and were protected by King Negus. He would later convert to Islam, himself.

Later that same year, they were followed by 101 Muslims, some of whom settled in current day Somalia, which was part of the "Land

of the Berbers." Here, in Zeila, they built the Mosque of the two Qiblahs. In **627 CE**, they also reportedly built Africa's oldest mosque - the Mosque of the Companions - in the Eritrean city of Massawa.

In **641 CE** During the reign of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, Muslim troops took over present-day Egypt and conquered present-day Libya the following year.

It was in **647 CE** that Muslims expanded to present-day Tunisia during the reign of the third Muslim Caliph Uthman Ibn Affan. The conquest of North Africa continued under



A modern artist's impression of the Mali Empire ruler Mansa Musa (r. 1312-1337 CE).

the Umayyad dynasty, which annexed parts of Algeria around **680 CE** and Morocco the following year. In **698 CE** the Byzantines fled from Carthage and Muslims gained full control of the Berber country. Conventional history says that the conquest of North Africa by the Umayyad Caliphate between **647–709** effectively ended Christianity in Africa for several centuries.

From Morocco, Muslim troops crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to Europe in **711 CE**, and by **750 CE** Muslim Arabs had already created a huge Islamic Empire in Middle East. The Arab conquest of Spain and the successive push of Arab armies culminated in an empire that stretched over three continents. These Muslims from North and West Africa came to be known by Europeans at large as *Moors*.

With the popularity and influence of Caliphs of the Abbasid Dynasty (750–1258), came the second great wave of peaceful migration of intercultural Muslims from the Nile Valley to Niger, and of Arab traders from the desert.

Between the 8th and 9th centuries, Arab traders, travelers, and African clerics spread the religion along the eastern coast of Africa and to western and central Sudan. The first converts were Sudanese merchants. In the 9th century, Muslim Sultanates were being established in the Horn of Africa. Islam gained momentum during the 10th century in West Africa with the start of the Almoravid dynasty's campaign on the Senegal River.

Around **900 CE**, Arab merchants came to Ghana, and taught the locals about Islam.

Some merchants funded the building of mosques, and many government officials and merchants converted to Islam. They embraced the teachings of Islam, which emphasized brotherhood and provided a moral code of conduct for peaceful trade and commercial activities between people of different nations. With this, Islam continued to spread slowly throughout the continent via trade and preaching.

In the 11th century, the Almoravid intervention was led by a group of Berber nomads who were strict observers of Islamic law. This renewed the momentum of Islam's spread in the empire of Ghana and beyond. Similarly, in the Swahili coast, Islam made its way inland. Midway into the 11th century, the Kanem Empire, whose influence extended into Sudan, converted to Islam. At the same time, toward West Africa, the reigning ruler of the Bornu Empire embraced the religion.

The masses of rural peasants had remained unaffected up to that point. But, as rulers and courtiers adopted Islam, their subjects followed suit. Moreover, as traders settled in places like Timbuktu in **1000 CE**, they also brought Islamic scholars with them, who spoke and wrote Arabic. Islam gave disparate West African tribes one common language to speak. By learning the Quran, they learned to read and write, and the rate of literacy was high.

By the 12th century, the Kilwa Sultanate had spread as far south as Mozambique. With the fall of Ghana in **1235 CE** and the successive rise of Mali in its place, conversions to Islam greatly increased under a devout Muslim king in **1307 CE**. King Mansa Musa brought Muslim scholars from Makkah to teach in Mali's learning centers, and greatly expanded Mali's border during his rule. However, successive kings were not able to protect Mali's vast territories and wealth.

By **1400 CE**, Mali was weakened, and Berbers took over the trade and learning centers of Timbuktu and Walata. **1435 CE**, the Songhai region's prince declared Gao's independence from Mali, and in the next decades began conquering neighbors under Muslim rule. By **1490 CE**, Muslim king Askia Muhammad declared Islam as the state religion, encouraging conversion of non-Muslims, and making the country become a center of learning. In **1500 CE** Islamic Songhai is the greatest empire of Africa.

After Morocco captured Songhai's salt mines in **1585 CE**, it was not long before they went after the empire's source of gold. Eventually Goa, Timbuktu, and finally Songhai itself, fall to Morocco's soldiers.

Meanwhile in the 16th century, the Ouaddai Empire and the Kingdom of Kano had embraced Islam, and later in the 18th century, the Nigeria based Sokoto Caliphate led by Usman dan Fodio was instrumental in spreading Islam.

It was not until the second half of the 19th century, under the Zanzibar Sultanate, that Islam crossed deeper into Malawi and Congo. The British then brought their labor force from India, of which some Muslims, to their colonies in Africa towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Today, Islam is the predominant religion of the northern half of Africa. It is mainly concentrated in the **Maghreb** (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia), which in European histories, is often called the Barbary Coast. Islam is also concentrated in the **Horn of Africa** (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, and de facto Somaliland), and the **Sahel** (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal), as well as **West Africa**.



# Bilal ibn Rabah:

## Black Icon, First Muezzin and Leader of the Faithful

As racial inequality rises in the world, we want to highlight the story of one of the most important figures in Islamic history. This is the story of how an African boy, who once faced extreme torture and tyranny, became one of the most trusted and loyal figures in Islamic history and later fought for justice and equality.

The rich history of African Americans in the United States needs more attention given the rising discrimination against them. Carter Godwin Woodson, U.S. historian, author, and journalist, said: "If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition. It becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated."

Bilal ibn Rabah, was an Abyssinian who faced great amount of hardship due to his color, and a prominent African-Arab companion of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who has the distinction of being the first Muezzin, a person who calls the faithful to the prayer, in Islam. It's a highly regarded position in the Islamic world.



Bilal ibn Rabah, was an Abyssinian who faced great amount of hardship due to his color, and a prominent African-Arab companion of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who has the distinction of being the first Muezzin, a person who calls the faithful to the prayer, in Islam. It's a highly regarded position in the Islamic world. "

Bilal was one of the first Africans to embrace Islam. His life story, which is a good example of Islam's respect for equality, was turned into an animation film a few years ago and was an instant hit.

Bilal was born on March 5, 580, in Makkah, in modern-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His father Rabah was an Arab from the Banu Humah clan, while his mother, Hamamah, was once a princess of Abyssinia.

Bilal got an opportunity early on to know about Prophet Muhammad from the leaders of the Quraysh tribe in Makkah. Their comments about Prophet Muhammad ranged from hatred and contempt to praise for his integrity and honesty.

Bilal's excitement about the newly introduced religion (though Islam's origin begins with the creation of this world, only the name and some new laws came to be adapted with the passage of time) and Prophet Muhammad grew, and he became more and more interested in Islam.

The fact that God does not measure people by anything, but by the measure of their character, taqwa (piety) and actions impressed Bilal to a great extent, and he thought if there was any religion that is divine, it must be Islam.

Inspired by Prophet Muhammad, Bilal chose to tread his own path and accepted Islam. His faith eventually helped him become a free man and lead a life of dignity. When Umayyah ibn Khalaf, one of the elders of Quraysh and a major opponent of Islam during that period, learnt about Bilal's inclination towards Islam, he tortured him and forced him not to get influenced by the new faith.

But filled with the love of Prophet Muhammad and Islam, Bilal remained steadfast in his faith despite extreme torture and kept saying "Ahad, Ahad." (Allah is One, Allah is One)."

Later on, Bilal became one of the closest and most trusted and distinguished companions of Prophet Muhammad. After the migration to Madinah, and when the institution of *Adhan* (the call to prayer) was founded, it was Bilal who was given the honor to be the first muezzin. The second Islamic caliph, Umar ibn Khattab, called him Sayyidna (our leader).

### First muezzin

Among the stirringly evocative symbols of Islam is the *adhan*, the Arabic call to prayer,

evocatively intoned in a resonant cadence by a muezzin who invites the faithful to prayer, traditionally from a platform on the minaret. The tradition of reciting *adhan* into the ears of a newborn is widely practiced in Muslims.

Bilal's voice was loud and known all around as he used to amble the streets to make residents aware of the prayer time. After the emigration of the Prophet and his followers from Makkah to Madinah, a companion of the Prophet named Abd Allah ibn Zaid had

a vision in which he saw himself trying to buy a wooden clapper to summon people to prayer. But the man who had the clapper advised him to call out to the people instead and intone a short message. Ibn Is'haq, the eighth-century biographer of the Prophet, wrote: "Ibn Zaid went to Muhammad (PBUH) with his story and Muhammad, approving, told him to ask an Ethiopian named Bilal, who had a marvelous voice, to call the Muslims to prayer. As Ibn Is'haq

told the story (in Albert Guillaume's translation): "When the Apostle was told of this, he said that it was a true vision if God so willed it, and that he should go to Bilal and communicate it to him so that he might call to prayer thus, for he had a more penetrating voice. When Bilal acted as muezzin, 'Umar I, who later became the second caliph, heard him in his house and came to the Apostle... saying that he had seen precisely the same vision. The Apostle said, 'God be praised for that.'"



Inspired by Prophet Muhammad, Bilal chose to tread his own path and accepted Islam. His faith eventually helped him become a free man and lead a life of dignity. When Umayyah ibn Khalaf, one of the elders of Quraysh and a major opponent of Islam during that period, learnt about Bilal's inclination towards Islam, he tortured him and forced him not to get influenced by the new faith. "

Having migrated to Madinah, Bilal took part in key battles including those of Badr, Ohud, Khandaq and others. In the battle of Badr, he killed the staunch enemy of Islam — and his own former tyrant master — Umayyah.

Later, upon the victorious entry to Makkah, it was Bilal again who was asked to ascend and stand on top of the holy Kaaba to perform the call to prayer. It was in 630 AD, when Bilal's finest hour arrived, on an occasion regarded as one of the most hallowed moments in Islamic history. After the Muslim forces had captured Makkah, the Prophet's muezzin ascended to the top of Kaaba to call the Believers to prayer - the first time the call to prayer was heard within Islam's holiest city.

After the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632, Bilal left Madinah, heartbroken at the loss of his companion and friend. He moved to Damascus in Syria and helped to establish Islam in that region. Bilal married a lady named Hind, and she and her children migrated to Ethiopia. Historians believe Bilal, Prophet Muhammad's mace-bearer and steward, died in 18 AH and

was buried at Bab-Al Sagheer near Jama Umavi in Damascus.

As Black History Month is observed, Islam reminds people that it was Prophet Muhammad who was the first in the records of world history to declare equality among human beings more than 1,400 years ago.



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In the presence of over 120,000 companions during Hajj, Prophet Muhammad declared: "O people! Your Lord is one Lord, and you all share the same father (Adam). Indeed, there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab or of a non-Arab over an Arab; or of a white over a black; nor a black over a white, except by taqwa (righteousness)."

Bilal's rise to a position of prominence in Islam is evidence of the importance of pluralism and racial equality in Islam as the Noble Qur'an rightly puts it: "And one of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors; most surely there are signs in this for the learned." (30:22).





# Omar Ibn Said:

## Islamic Scholar

There are vital influences of Islam that survive today in the form of poetry, music, and spiritual uplifting in non-Muslim Western countries.

Omar bin Sayyid, an Islamic scholar who was captured in what is now known as Senegal and transported by slave ship to America where he remained enslaved until his death in 1864 has had a lasting impact on today's faithful. He was born in 1770 into a wealthy family. Their wealth allowed Omar to study under the top Islamic scholars of the day, spending 25 years under their tutelage. He was a teacher and tradesman and prominent in his community.

Omar was an early personification of Islam during perhaps the most difficult times in history. He was forced to renounce his religion as a slave, but he wrote extensively on Islam and took a scholarly approach to appreciating the parallels between Christianity and Islam. His life is a lasting example of how an individual can practice his religion in the face of what appears to be insurmountable odds in America.

In 1807, he was captured by slave hunters and sold to an American slave trader who sent him to Charleston, South Carolina, a hub for slave traders in America. He escaped to Fayetteville, North Carolina, but was recaptured and sold to slaveholder James Owen.

Owen had Omar learn English and gave him an English-language version of the Qur'an and an Arabic-language version of the Bible. But he was, eventually forced him to renounce Islam and convert to Christianity.



Fula Islamic Scholar Omar ibn Said in the United States, c. 1850.



The sentiment of "Levee Camp Holler" and similar devotional songs and blues music follows Omar Sayyid's own emotional journey as penned in his manuscript and autobiography and brought to the Black community through Bilal bin Rabah Al-Habashi. "



Omar was an early personification of Islam during perhaps the most difficult times in history. He was forced to renounce his religion as a slave, but he wrote extensively on Islam and took a scholarly approach to appreciating the parallels between Christianity and Islam. His life is a lasting example of how an individual can practice his religion in the face of what appears to be insurmountable odds in America. "

This brought out the two sides of Omar Sayyid. He studied the Bible and was praised, if not celebrated, by the white community for his embrace of his new religion, but he secretly still studied Islam. He blurred the lines of Christianity and Islam and at one point wrote the Surah Al-Nasr in his Bible. He also wrote 14 manuscripts in Arabic on history and theology, as well as his autobiography, which had confirmed his devotion to Islam.

Omar's survival as a slave in the antebellum South demanded his public acceptance of Christianity, but his secret devotion to Islam was a common theme running through the lives of many slaves.

An estimated 30 percent of slaves brought to America were believed to be Muslim. Like Omar, West African Blacks were forced to give up their religion and convert. The slave in public adhered to his slaveholder's theological views, but it was a different matter for the private man and woman with many continuing

their religious practices.

Omar's subversive practice to keep Islam alive in an inhospitable country filtered to the field slaves who held on to their traditions and customs by singing devotional songs to the cadence of the adhan and which was unknown to their slaveholders. It kept the memory of their former home and their religion alive.

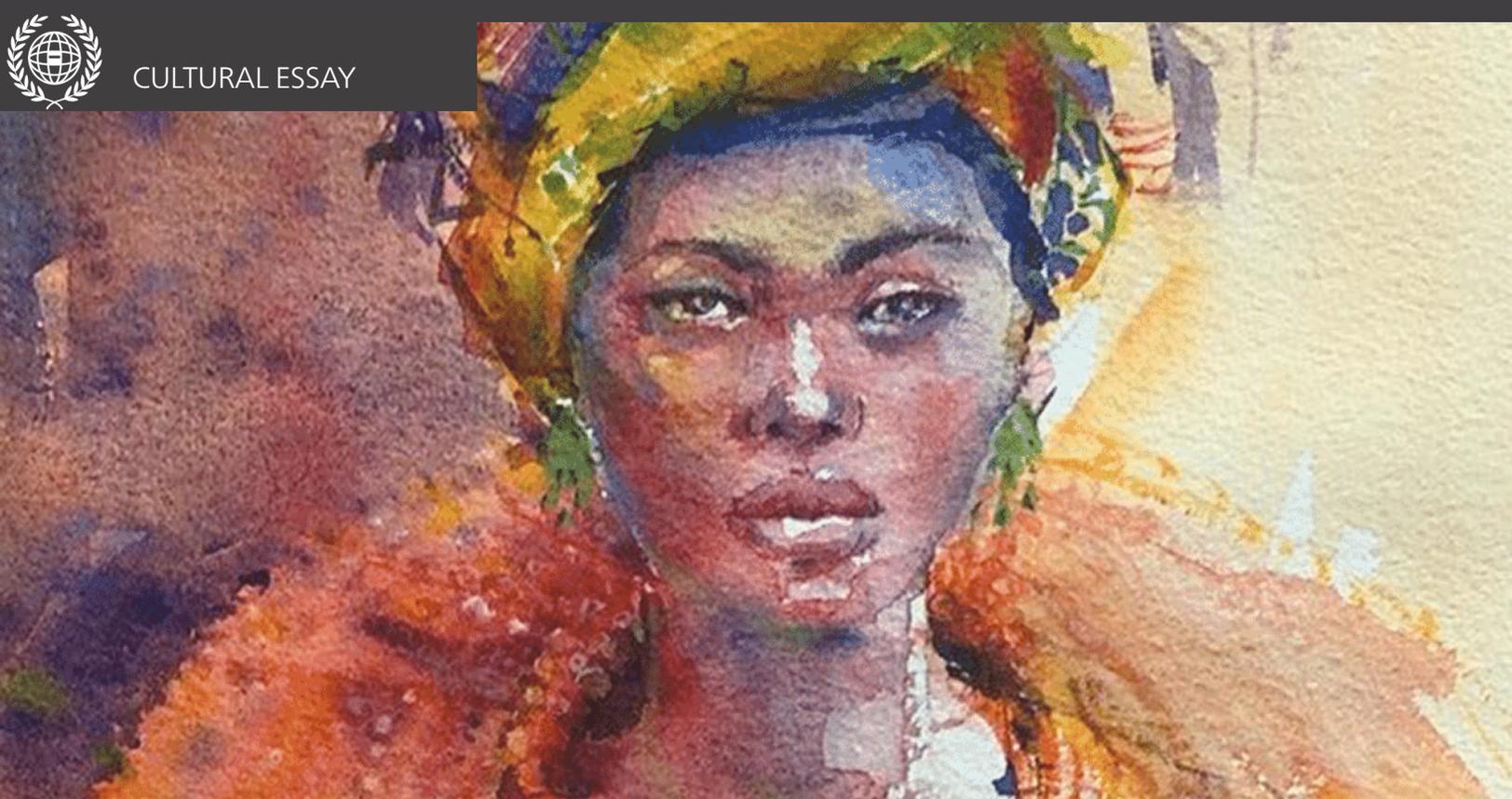
Sylviane Anna Diouf, the Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University, argues that blues music, firmly the domain of Black musicians in the Deep South, grew from slave devotional songs.

Southern Baptist churches were also inspired by field devotional songs, incorporating similar lyrics and musical elements and structure in their own services.

Perhaps the most obvious connection between the blues and the adhan is the blues song "Levee Camp Holler" that is clearly influenced by the Call to Prayer and field devotional songs. The opening lyrics of "Well, Lord, I woke up this morning', man, I am feeling' bad ... Well, I was thinking' 'bout the good times, Lord, I once have had," have the unmistakable cadence, shake, vibration and emphasis of words of the adhan reciter.

The song became a standard in prison camps, among chain gangs and post-Civil War field workers that provided an emotional portrait of the bleak lives of Black men and women while at the same time providing spiritual uplifting from their plight.

The sentiment of "Levee Camp Holler" and similar devotional songs and blues music follows Omar Sayyid's own emotional journey as penned in his manuscript and autobiography and brought to the Black community through Bilal bin Rabah Al-Habashi.



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Queen Amina of Zaria.

# Honoring Islamic Art Heritage in the United States of America During Black History Month

February is Black History Month in the United States of America. More than anything, it is a time of recognition and celebration – of the significance of diversity, acceptance, and perseverance. But beyond everything else, it is about the achievements of Black people in American history.

Even though only less than three percent of African Americans are Muslims, many are prominent athletes, politicians, activists, and artists. Some of the most important historical and modern symbols include Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Dikembe Mutombo and Sumaiyah Jones.

In celebrating Black History Month, the MWL also celebrates that rich Islamic past that has been hidden from much of the world in the midst of rising Islamophobia; however, February provides an opportunity to reflect on the experience of a full society, including the pains of the past as well as the current, continuing battles. In honor of Black History Month, the Muslim World League celebrates Black art, music, and literature that have added to inspiration and revolution throughout the world.

The existence of Black Muslims in the U.S. is well established. Black Muslims have made significant contributions to the spiritual, civil,



**Portrait of Mohommah G. Baquaqua, 1854.**

and social lives of Black America, and the Black Muslim experience is part of a heritage shared by every citizen of the United States and the world. Their American story began in the 16th century with exploratory voyages, continued as African Muslims were shackled and forcibly transported to the New World on slave ships, continued through the Revolutionary War, and is still noticeable throughout the United States. It is possible that almost a quarter of the Africans who arrived in America during slavery were Muslims.

The rare story of Mohommah G. Baquaqua survives today through his memoir, which was published in 1854, and his engraved portrait, which is on display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. His account of his early life bears similarities to the lives of many Africans who were brought to the New World as slaves, but then diverges once he gains his freedom. Baquaqua was born into a Muslim family in present-day Benin, where as an adolescent he learned the Quran. In 1845, he was cap-

tured, sold into slavery, and put on a slave ship bound for Brazil. He was purchased by a baker in Recife, but he came under the ownership of the owner of a merchant ship in 1847. That same year, when his ship, the *Lembrança*, docked in New York, he was approached by abolitionists who encouraged him to escape. He later journeyed to Boston, followed by Haiti, and finally settled north of the United States in nearby Canada. He worked with American Christian abolitionists and eventually converted to Christianity. His autobiography is the only known document about the slave trade written by a former Brazilian slave.

Through the years, the number of Muslims diminished, but they left literature, journals, and memoirs that encourage a genuine preview into their lives. One of the greatest things the world can do to celebrate and amplify Black History Month is educate one another on the achievements of Black Americans and the important role Black people, including Black Muslims, have played throughout history.



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