African American Muslim Congregations, 1913-2013

Edward E. Curtis IV
Millennium Chair of the Liberal Arts & Professor of Religious Studies
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

For nearly a century—depending on a still-moving timelines of institutional development among Muslim Americans—there have been African American Muslim congregations in the modern American sense. That is, African American Muslims have created gatherings of people that meet with one another, generally in a fixed location, for what they understand to be religious purposes. In the American context, religious congregations are among the most powerful and well-funded forms of voluntary association; they constitute a basic building block of U.S. civil society. While subject to state discipline—regulated as they are in indirect but powerful ways through the federal tax code and local laws—they are also protected to a certain degree by the U.S. Constitution. Among African American Muslims, like many other religionists in the United States, religious congregations are a primary institutional and communal means through which many, if not most believers form relationships with other Muslims, and in several cases, practice their religious obligations and commitments.

And yet the study of African American Islam has paid little attention to the congregation as a unit of analysis. There is a well-developed body of scholarly literature on African American Islam, but it analyzes this phenomenon in terms of cults and sects, mass movements, social and political protest, charismatic leaders, organizational history, and more recently, religious beliefs,

This is the author's manuscript of the work published in final form as:

Curtis, E. E., IV. (2014). African American Muslim Congregations, 1913–2013. In A. B. McCloud (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of African American Islam*. Oxford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199929269.013.001

philosophies, rituals and practices.[1] There have been no book-length treatments of the history and life of local African American Muslim congregations as a whole—and the coverage of individual African American Muslim congregations is scarce. This lack of scholarship means that an essential vantage point on the development of Islamic practice among African Americans is missing: very few pieces of scholarship record and analyze the inter-personal relationships, personal feelings, and religious experiences, as well as the power-making, the identity formation, and the social patterning that are constructed in the intimate spaces of the local spaces.

This essay considers the implications of analyzing African American Islam from the perspective of the local congregation. By so doing, it confirms the importance of racialization in U.S. religious life. Though there are many examples of multi-racial congregations among Muslim Americans, the long institutional presence of black-majority, black-dominant congregations demonstrates the importance of the racial divide in the practice of Islam in the United States. While many congregations earnestly desire to be multi-racial, the organization of American religion in …… work against that dream, and multi-racial congregations give life to mono-racial congregations. In this racialized context African American Muslim congregations must be understood within the larger history of black American religious congregations. Like black churches, black congregations have often served as a "nation within a nation," performing the public, civic, economic, and social functions key to African American communal life.

Paying attention to the variety of Muslim congregations populated mainly by people of African descent has radical implications for the ways in which African American Muslims figure

[1] Examples published before 2000 include Edmann Doane Beynon, "The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit," *American Journal of Sociology* 42 (May 1938): 894-907; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); and E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: The Search for an Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

into larger U.S. historical narratives about religion in the twentieth century. Though scholars who specialize in the study of Islam in America have painted a far different picture of Islamic institutions in the interwar period, most American religious historiography still locates the origins of African American Islam in the history of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. By viewing the origins of Islamic institutions through a wider and more in-depth knowledge base of local Muslim congregations, one can see that the practice of Islam was theologically and doctrinally diverse from the very first moments of congregational inception: before the Nation of Islam was ever formed, African Americans were already practicing Ahmadi, Sunni, and Moorish forms of Islamic religious interpretation. Compared to African American churches, African American Muslim congregations were not particularly nationalistic or ethnocentric either—they were part and parcel of a larger African American religious scene that, among Christians and others, produced a variety of responses to the challenges of Jim Crown segregation, racial violence, unequal opportunity, and human migration.

Looking at the larger phenomenon of African American Islam from a congregational perspective reveals that these diverse roots continued to sprout different forms of Islamic ethics, doctrine, practice, and politics among African American Muslims in the postwar period. Even if Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam captured the gaze of mass media, scholars, and government surveillance, all of the forms of Islam that had already established an institutional presence in the 1920s were either perpetuated or grew in black-majority and black-led congregations. By the 1960s and 1970s, it was clear that Sunni interpretations of Islam would become the predominant voice of most African American Muslims, a trend that continues into the present. But the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which permitted many more foreigners from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to immigrate to the United States, meant that, at least eventually, a significant influx of African-

born Muslims, the likes of which had not be seen in Muslim America since before the Civil War, would contribute even more diversity to the practice of Islam in black-majority congregations.

In what follows the essay provides evidence for this long arc of African American Muslim congregational history. While focusing mainly on the United States, it begins to suggest the need to understand African American Islam as a hemispheric phenomenon by including English-speaking black Muslims in the Caribbean, Central America, and the Atlantic in its narrative. While a congregational perspective reveals new insights into the diversity of Muslim identities and practices in black America, the essay is also written with an awareness that a focus on congregations simultaneously obscures other aspects of the larger story. The conclusion of the essay outlines the limits of this approach and imagines how a trans-congregational perspective might help to connect the local histories described here.

First African American Congregations, World War I – World War II

As historians of Muslim America have revealed, Muslims across the hemisphere created religious congregations long before the twentieth century. If congregation is interpreted in its broadest sense, it is likely impossible to date the first time that a group of Muslims came together for a religious purpose in the New World. Was it in the Spanish Caribbean, or Dutch New Amsterdam, or Brazil? Given the legal opposition to the importation of Muslim slaves by the Spanish Crown in the sixteenth century, the public practice of Islam was fraught with danger. Still, surely the many hundreds of thousands of Muslims who came to the Americas in the colonial era managed to come together even in such circumstances. There is simply too much

evidence of Muslim cultural and literary production in the colonial era to dismiss this possibility, and there is likely much more to be written about this period of Muslim American history. In any case, by the 1800s, the thriving African-born Muslim community of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, was supporting one Muslim congregation, lessons in Arabic and Islamic studies for students, and the communal celebration of Islamic holidays such as Ramadan.

In the United States, some prominent Muslims such as Abd al-Raghman Ibrahima and Omar ibn Said were often isolated from other Muslims (and in some cases, other people of African descent); they had little chance to worship together. But along the seacoast of Georgia and South Carolina, where the population of black outnumbered whites and there were African-born Muslims arriving into the nineteenth century, some families prayed together. There are also some suggestions that Muslims and non-Muslims often combined various Orisha and Islamic practices into harvest festivals—and rather than imposing irrelevant denominational boundaries from our own historical moment onto the practices of these African-descended people, it is important to understand that sectarianism did not necessarily mean anything to those who often used whatever religious technologies worked, no matter what their origin.

But even if there were congregations in the broadest sense among Muslims of African descent in the colonial era and the nineteenth century, it is essential to recognize the differences between such gatherings and the formal, legally-constituted, state-disciplined religious congregation that developed other religious institutions in the United States and other American nations. These congregations are the ones that scholars have largely understood as cults, movements, political parties, and even businesses. They were all of that, but they were also places where people met to pray together, celebrated various feasts and social occasions, sometimes sang and other times chanted, donned the particular dress of their group, showed off

their new husband or wife, ate food with special meaning, and so on. These forms of human culture gained religious meaning partly through their performance in a space that was specifically linked to the theological, doctrinal, ethical, and ritual imagination so often associated in congregants' minds with what is known as religion.

Religious congregations have been essential communal institutions—as de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, these voluntary associations are the hothouses of social formation. Long denied to African Americans, the congregational form, though established before the civil war, took root in the Reconstruction era. This is the era that produced churches as a "nation within a nation." The "church" may not have been the exclusive building block of local civic participation for African Americans—there were clubs, fraternities and sororities, mutual aid societies, and other groups—but it was by far the most popular. No sooner had the church established its dominance a social-institutional form than other religious congregations began to arise. It seems as if black Jewish religious congregations were the first to offer a religious alternative as a congregational form founded on different symbols, narratives, and theologies, but by the era of World War I, Muslim groups began to be formed as well.

Scholars continue to debate exactly when the first black-majority religious congregation was established in the United States. There is a body of oral historical evidence, first recorded by a scholar in the 1940s?, which indicates that the Moorish Science Temple began as the Canaanite Temple in 1913 in Newark, New Jersey. But it is simply unclear, based on contemporaneous documents, exactly what the religious orientation of the Canaanite Temple was. It may have been that the Islamic element of the group was not included in the group's ideology until the 1920s, when the headquarters of Moorish Science Temple of America (MST) were created in Chicago and when the group's sacred scripture, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple I*, was

published. If the MST was the first modern African American religious congregation, it was an exception, a statistical outlier.

Most African American Muslim congregations arose instead in the 1920s in the encounter between American-born blacks and African, Asian, and Southeastern European Muslim missionaries, immigrants, and visitors. The two main regional zones for such exchanges were the East Coast and the Midwest. By the end of the 1920s, New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis, and perhaps other cities, had black-majority, black-led Muslim congregations. This was before the Nation of Islam (NOI) was established. The NOI was part of a larger flowering of religious congregations that occurred as more and more African Americans moved to the northern and Midwestern cities as part of the Great Migration from the rural South. It was only one of perhaps twenty or more African American Muslim congregations that had been established across the country by World War II.

There are many different ways that one might chart and categorize the emergence and life of these African American Muslim congregations, though it seems essential to emphasize the theological and doctrinal diversity of the different groups. Since so much scholarship has been produced about the NOI and its eventual transition to Sunni Islam under the leadership of Imam W.D. Mohammed, it might seem as if the journey of that particular group is also the larger story of African American Islam from heterodoxy to orthodoxy. In formal scholarship and in informal conversation, one can still hear the idea that African Americans were largely ignorant of Sunni Islam before the 1960s. This is a form of memory-making that does not match the historical record. These memories ignore the inter-war institution-building of African American Muslims that helped to lead to the eventual "triumph" of Sunni Islam over its competitors in black America. It likely reflects not only the desire to recognize the key contributions of W. D.

Mohammed to the Sunnization of black America, but also the lack of an institutional memory among Muslims who trace their arrival in the United States after 1965.

The history of African American Muslim congregations suggests a different narrative, one in which multiple and competing religious congregations that understand themselves as Muslim are arising at the same historical moment. In this early moment of congregation-building among African American Muslims, there was enormous doctrinal variety. This was a religious revival of sorts, and as "the spirit moved" on the makers of Muslim American institutions, wildly different ideas of what it meant to be Muslim were being created and tested. This was also a remarkable period in which black-led, black-majority congregations were established alongside and often out of foreign- or immigrant-led Muslim missions.

No one was more important to the eventual building of black-majority, black-led Muslim congregations than Satti Majid, although far less scholarship has been devoted to his role than to figures such as Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad. His role in the history of African American Muslim congregations is also noteworthy in that from the beginning, he was advocating a Sunni interpretation of Islam religion based on authoritative readings of the Qur'an and the Sunna. Satti Majid Muhammad al-Qadi Suwar al-Dhahab was a Sudanese man born in 1883 who came to the United States in 1904 through the port of New Orleans. At some point during his long stay in the United States—it is not clear exactly when--Majid began to build religious congregations and other Muslim institutions. He was peripatetic, traveling through northern and Midwestern cities throughout the 1920s. Leader of the Detroit chapter of the Red Crescent Society in 1920, Majid played a role in the purchase of grave plots for Muslims, and in 1922, helped to create the Moslem Welfare Society, a group that, in keeping with many other American religious institutions, was both a religious congregation and a mutual aid society. At

the same time, he was attempting to establish a successful New York mission near 22 West Street in Manhattan, where he wrote to the British Consul on behalf of some stranded Muslim sailors. (195-198).

Majid's greatest success as an organizer of a Muslim congregation came in Buffalo, New York, where, in 1924, he emerged as the undisputed shaykh, or leader, of the community. Hundreds of local Muslims joined, and from this base of support, Majid formed what seems to be the very first national Sunni Muslim organization, the United Moslem Society. Long before the creation of the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States and Canada in the 1950s, an African visitor managed to unite Sunni Muslims from Detroit, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and perhaps other cities, into one national body. Though its success was short-lived, its mere existence indicated the vitality of Sunni Muslim congregations in the 1920s. Part of Majid's success stemmed from his focus not only on immigrants, but also on American-born black converts. In 1927, Majid became leader of the African Moslem Welfare Society of America in Pittsburgh; its 1928 incorporation papers specifically outlined Majid's determination to "unite the Moslem people and eradicate racial differences due to their color and nationality and bring them in closer association with each other." FBI surveillance of the group conducted during World War II revealed that even after Majid had left the United States in 1929, his vision became a reality: foreign- and immigrant-born wore long robes and fezzes to congregational meetings in which people recited the Qur'an. (198-200).

Majid's ability to bridge the gap between foreign- and American-born Muslims seems to suggest that Majid's efforts should be categorized not as a form of African American Islam but rather as a more pan-racial Islam. And yet, if this is so, why were some of Majid's most successful congregations called the "African" Moslem Welfare Society? It may be that Majid's

inclusive language toward all Muslims was in reality addressing non-white people. It is important to keep in mind that, despite victories in U.S. courts classifying Arabs as white, the lived reality of Arabic-speaking people was often different. It was not until after World War II when most found acceptance as white ethnics. Furthermore, the National Origins Act of 1924 targeted Asians, among other "non-Nordic" people, as less desirable immigrants. Asians were people of color in this period of U.S. history.

Another foreign missionary who played a pivotal role in the eventual development of African American Muslim congregations was Muhammad Sadiq. Sadiq traveled to the United States as a missionary of the Ahmadiyya movement, an Indian Muslim reform movement organized around the teachings of nineteenth-century religious leader Ghulam Ahmad. Ahmad, who articulated the need for a self-consciously modern, liberal, and peaceful Islam, was believed by some of his followers to be both the Christian Messiah and the Islamic Mahdi, a figure in Islamic eschatology who will appear before the Day of Judgment to usher in peace and justice. One branch of his followers thought that he was a prophet, violating the Sunni tenet that Muhammad of Arabia was the final prophet. Another branch thought that he was simply a *mujaddid*, a renewer of religion—and idea acceptable within the confines of most Sunni Islamic thought.

Muhammad Sadiq, who was a follower of the latter, became a pivotal figure in the flowering of African American Muslim congregations because of his very early missionary focus on Islam as a religion of social and racial equality and black historical achievement. In 1921, Sadiq created a mission on Chicago's South Side and discovered that African Americans were far more open to his message than whites. In addition to establishing its own missions, the Ahmadiyya movement advocated the thought of Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro

Improvement Association (UNIA). Sadiq hoped that the UNIA would declare Islam to be its official religion, arguing that it could united all people of color into one spiritual community. Though this form of solidarity was never achieved, the Ahmadiyya endorsement of and sometime cooperation with local chapters of the UNIA clearly helped to bring more African Americans into the fold of Islam.

In four years, Sadiq was able to convert over one thousand African Americans to Islam, and soon his movement was spreading to the cities with sizeable African American populations. Sadiq founded a newspaper, *The Muslim Sunrise*, which documented his missionary efforts, included instructions on how to make *salat*, or prescribed daily prayers, and included powerful indictments of white American Christian racism. In the 1920s, as the Ku Klux Klan practically controlled states such as Indiana and the U.S. Congress passed racist immigration quotas limited non-white immigration, this was a convincing argument. Later African American Muslims, including those in the Nation of Islam, would repeat Sadiq's claims that white Christianity had justified the enslavement of Africans, destroyed the Islamic heritage of such slaves, and severed the connection of African Americans to the original tongue, Arabic. Islam, the newspaper often preached, offered its followers teachings of self-reliance, self-determination, and self-respect.

This was no mere rhetoric in Sadiq's organization, as was evidenced by the fact that the St. Louis congregation of Ahmadis was led by P. Nathaniel Johnson, who became Ahmad Din. In explaining his own reasons for becoming a Muslim, this African American Muslim emphasized the spiritual aspect of Islam, and especially his love of the Qur'an. One of the reasons that the Ahmadiyya were successful missionaries was their emphasis on providing English-language translations of Islam's holy book to potential converts. Their edition would remain on the shelves of many African American Muslims though the 1960s and 1970s. Like

many African Americans religious seekers in a marketplace of American religious alternatives in the 1920s, Ahmad Din read literature of several different religions. He said that he had found the Qur'an to be the best: The Qur'an, Ahmad Din explained, was "a poem, a code of laws, a prayer book, and the world's best bible combined." Though most scriptures were an "aggregation of poets, prophets, prophetesses, statesmen and lawgivers, historically covering thousands of years, crammed full of conflicting statements," he argued, the Qur'an was the direct word of God issued exclusively though Muhammad, whom Ahmad Din called a "master spiritualist," one who was "intoxicated with the gifts of God."

Ahmad Din brought other African Americans into Islam, and at least of these men went on to become the leader of an Ahmadi mission and then a Sunni imam. Texas native Walter Gregg, for example, became Wali Akram in St. Louis trasnferred to Cleveland, where assisted in the running of the Ahmadi mosque. By 1937, however, Akram had left the Ahmadiyya movement. He created his own Muslim congregation, the First Cleveland Mosque. Like many other African American Muslim leaders in the era of the Great Depression, no matter what their "denominational" bent, Akram advocated for black-owned businesses and other forms of black self-determination. Like most other African American Muslim congregational leaders, he also associated Islam and the Arabic language with black people's historical achievements.

By the 1930s, Akram was part of a growing trend: American-born black Muslims were increasingly establishing independent Sunni Muslim congregations. The Ahmadiyya movement was one institutional source of this phenomenon, while Satti Majid's African Moslem Welfare

Societies were another. In New York, Satti Majid's most important student, David Donald, eventually changed his name to Daoud Ahmed Faisal. An immigrant from Granada who made his living as a musician while also representing in a congregation that met near the corner of 128th Street and Lennox Avenue in Harlem, he established the Islamic Mission of America on 143 State Street in Brooklyn in 1937. From there, Faisal, his spouse, Khadija (born Clara Forbes in Bermuda), became important leaders not only of both American-born and foreign-born Muslims in the country's largest city. (200-202)

Another African American Muslim convert, South Carolinian James Lomax, became Muhammad Ezaldeen, and traveled in the 1930s to Cairo, Egypt, where he studied Islam at a male Muslim youth organization. Upon his return, Ezaldeen created the Addeynu Allahe Universal Arabic Association (AAUAA), yet another African American Muslim group that linked the practice of Sunni Islam and Arabic language to black American political, cultural, and economic self-determination. In addition to establishing a Muslim congregation in Camden, New Jersey, Ezaldeen's followers created an intentional Muslim community in West Valley, New York, outside of Buffalo. Collectively the forty residents of the community bought approximately 500 acres, hoping to farm the land and create a self-sustaining community while also living by the principles of Islamic religion. Residents performed their new identities in a variety of ways, including in their dress. They wore turbans and fezzes, and some told outsiders that they were not Americans, but Arabs.

In 1943 Muhammad Ezaldeen, Wali Akram, and Daoud Ahmed Faisal came together to form an umbrella organization for their local congregations and regional associations. Dubbed the Uniting Islamic Societies of America, followers of the three African American Muslim leaders first met in Philadelphia at the "All Moslem and Arab Convention" in Philadelphia, and

then in 1944, they once again gathered in Pittsburgh. Other than these meetings little seems to have come of this umbrella organization, though it was, like Satti Majid's attempt to form the United Moslem Society in the 1920s, a noteworthy attempt to create a nation-wide network of Sunni Muslim congregations.

As important as the efforts of both the Ahmadiyya movement and various Sunni Muslim missionaries and imams were in the interwar period, it was likely the Moorish Science Temple of America (MST) who had established the largest number of Muslim congregations during this time. How many according to the FBI File??????????????????? Though well-known among scholars, the MST is the one group of Muslims who inspire the most doubt regarding the issue of Islamic authenticity. They did not call their congregations mosques; they called them temples. They did not read the Qur'an; they had their own scripture. They did not believe so much in the prophecy of Muhammad of Arabic but in that of Noble Drew Ali. It is for these reasons, among others, that the group has been o labeled proto-Islamic, or nominally Muslim, or simply a cult. And while all those labels might be used effectively in narrating certain aspects of the MST, they fail to understand the congregational life of the African Americans who attended prayers and pageants, read scriptures, followed a prophet, and sought goodness in the name of a religion named Islam. It bears repeating that the Moors did not perform Friday congregational prayers and they did not follow *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence. But neither do many other Muslim minorities around the world—among them Muslims in villages who prefer to go to shrines and Isma'ili Muslims who attend *jamatkhanas* instead of mosques. This was a different Islam than any that had preceded it; but all religions and all sects are new at some point in their history.

It is possible that the MST had its origins in a Newark-based organization called the Canaanite Temple, likely established around 1913 by S. A. Hamid. Later oral histories would

make this claim, though most would change the name of the founder to North Carolinian Timothy Drew or Noble Drew. This narrative of MST origins would be repeated in Arthur Huff Fauset's ground-breaking *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (1944) and from there made its way into nearly every standard history of Islam in America until recently. Whether or not the Canaanite Temple was the precursor to the MST, the MST that became a national movement was the one that had its headquarters in 1920s Chicago.

The MST that quite literally established temples around the country had its own scripture, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple* (1927). Also called the *Circle 7 Koran*, this sacred text contained some original teachings of MST leader Noble Drew Ali but mostly featured previously published writings popular among followers of esoteric and metaphysical religions. The use of the word "science" in the title of the organization pointed to the larger modern belief systems from which the Moorish movement drew much of its inspiration: like other advocates of New Thought, Drew Ali taught that his followers could improve their health and wealth by greater paying attention to the spiritual and moral aspects of their lives. A higher state of human consciousness required a clean soul, spiritual exercise, and a disciplined body. But in addition to following a strict moral code and meditating for earthly success, preached Ali, Moors needed to form communities, businesses, and other institutions that were separate from whites. Separation was a natural expression of human biology for Drew Ali: by nature, he said, all non-white people, whom he called Asiatic, were Muslim, while all white people were Christians. African Americans, he explained, were Asian who came originally from the nation of Morocco; hence, they would be known as Moors.

The Moors took their Islamic dress and other symbolic forms of culture not from foreign Muslim missionaries or from other Muslims but largely from the Black Shriners, or the Ancient

Egyptian Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. The Black Shriners were a fraternal association whose members donned Turkish fezzes, conducted large street parades in urban black neighborhoods, and named their lodges for Muslim historical figures. This rather odd source of the MST's Islamic material culture and symbols is yet another factor that leads many scholars to dismiss their Islamic-ness, though the origin of the MST's Islamic identity has little to do with whether these symbols were meaningful as part of the MST's religious culture. For instance, when African American anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset attended a Friday congregational service at the MST temple in Philadelphia, he remarked on its religious nature: it was quiet and contemplative as congregants chanted a hymn entitled "Moslem's that Old Time Religion" to the music of "Give Me that Old Time Religion." The scripture of Noble Drew Ali was recited, and a sermon was given on the teachings of the organization. All the congregants prayed: "Allah, Father of the Universe, the father of Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom, and Justice. Allah is my protector, my Guide, and my Salvation by night and by day, through His Holy Prophet, Drew Ali. Amen." Such prayers did not come from the Sunni Islamic canon, but scholars should not discount their meaning as an Islamic act simply on these grounds.

Many aspects of the teachings of the Moors and the Ahmadiyya influenced the establishement of yet another non-Sunni African American movement during the interwar period: the Nation of Islam. Begun by the mysterious W. D. Fard Muhammad, whose origins remain unclear, the NOI remained a small movement before World War II. Its two congregations were located in Detroit and Chicago, and after founder Fard Muhammad disappeared in 1933, his apparent heir, Elijah Muhammad, was not able to consolidate his control over the whole movement until after World War II. In many ways, it was the growth of local congregations under his centralized command that would define the practice of Islam in black America in the postwar era.

The Growth of Black Muslim Congregations, 1945 – present

While Ahmadi, Sunni, and Moorish congregations continued to be established or frequented by African Americans in cities and towns across the country, the prophetic movement of Elijah Muhammad likely created more new Muslim congregations in black America than all the other denominations of African American Islam combined. As is well known, Malcolm X played an important role in the organizational development of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam throughout the 1950s, especially in Boston and New York. But even after Malcolm X left the movement in early 1964, the number of mosques, also called temples at various points in the Nation of Islam's history, continued to expand. One of the under-reported and under-studied aspects of this famous movement is the hard work of rank-and-file members to sustain its activities and help it grow. Because the charisma of movement leaders Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and eventually Louis Farrakhan, is assumed to hypnotize believers into doing their bidding, it has been too easy for scholars to forget that these leaders are what their followers made them—their charisma is not inherent; it is constructed by those around them.

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, as he became known among his followers, preached that Fard was the Christian messiah and the Islamic Mahdi. At some point, he also declared Fard to be God in the flesh, a heretical claim for most Muslims around the world. Further, Muhammad also said that he was the Messenger of God, sent by Fard to "mentally resurrect the so-called Negro." For decades Muhammad produced prophetic teaching about the beginning and end of the world that put black people at the center of his metaphysical and ontological doctrines. According to his teachings, black people were the first people of the earth, and their life of

righteous living as Muslim members of the Tribe of Shabazz came to an end after a mad scientist called Yacub genetically engineered the brutish, violent white man. This white devil eventually enslaved the black man and made him forget his language, his history, and his religion. But from among these forgetful people, said Muhammad, God selected him to bring Muslims back to God, and to await the final judgment of the white devils.

Like many of the Muslim congregations before it and those that emerged in the same period, the Nation of Islam was religious and political all at the same time. It inculcated a sense of socially conservative ethics among its members, insisting that members eat healthy food, remain monogamous and straight, avoid liquor and tobacco, and eschew sports and secular entertainment. Its congregations inculcated the values of clean living instead, rewarding members who were modestly dressed, on time, disciplined, thrifty, and hard working. Looking at the life of the Nation of Islam from the point of view of its members yields a vibrant picture of eventually over one hundred religious congregations across the United States and eventually in Jamaica and Bermuda, as well. Congregants not only came for prayers, lectures, and religious holidays such as a Yuletide celebration of Ramadan, but also for meetings of the all-male Fruit of Islam and all-female Muslim Girls Training, groups that sustained various educational, social, and economic activities often almost every day of the week. In the range and frequency of activities performed, these Muslim congregations often paralleled the functions of black Christian congregations and other black voluntary associations—even if the theological, doctrinal, and ethical meaning of the activities were different.

While the Nation of Islam may have accounted for the largest number of black-majority Muslim congregations from the 1950s until the 1970s, it was clear that the black Sunni congregations were also growing in this period. The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (MIB), for

example, was established in 1967 by New Yorker Khalid Ahmad Tawfiq after he returned from study at Cairo's al-Azhar University. A former member of Malcolm X's Muslim Mosque, Inc., Tawfiq followed in Macolm's footsteps by combining a commitment to Sunni piety with a strong emphasis on black consciousness and self-determination. Thus, the MIB hoisted a red, black, and green flag—the colors of African independence—featuring a star and crescent in its Harlem headquarters where believers could live communally and educate their children in the 1970s.

In addition to local and independent black Muslim congregations, there were at least two major "denominations" that linked dozens of local congregations into national, and in some cases, international black Sunni networks. One was Darul Islam. Formed in the 1960s by former congregants of Daoud Faisal's State Street mosque in Brooklyn, Darul Islam also began as one congregation on 240 Sumpter Street. But the other Darul Islam congregations emerged in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. Emphasizing the need to follow the shari'a, Islamic law and ethics, in every aspect of life, Darul Islam congregants not only attempted to keep their mosques open for prayers both day and night; they also offered Arabic classes and community outreach activities. Perhaps as many as forty congregations became associated with this American Islamic denomination by the 1980s. In the final two decades of the twentieth century, the movement went in two main directions: one under the leadership of Jamil Abdullah al-Amin, the former H. Rap Brown and another under the leadership of a Pakistani Sufi preacher named Sheik Mubarik Ali Jilani. It was al-Amin's branch that attracted the mod followers as dozens of congregations across the country pledged their loyalty to this Atlanta-based African American leader.

The other major black Sunni denomination of this period was the Islamic Party of North America led by Yusuf Muzzafruddin Hamid, another former follower of Daoud Faisal at the State

Street mosque in Brooklyn. Established in 1971, the Islamic Party specifically targeted its community outreach and missionary activities toward African Americans. In Washington, D.C., it attracted many converts among the student body of Howard University, and these students willingly committed themselves to spreading the message of both community empowerment and Sunni Islamic religion to others. Throughout the 1970s, congregations formed around the message of the Islamic Party not only in Pittsburgh, New York, Houston, New Orleans, Chicago, and Akron, but also in Trinidad and Tobago, where its leaders would eventually establish their own group, the Jama'at al-Muslimeen.

As much as congregations aligned with the Islamic Party and Darul Islam nurtured the growth of Sunni Islamic congregations among black Muslims, the triumph of Sunni Islam as the dominant mode of interpretation, authenticity, and self-identification among African American Muslim congregations in the United States was only achieved in the 1970s with the dramatic change in the Nation of Islam's leadership. One of the great ironies of African American Muslim congregational history is that the eventual success of Sunni authority over competing forms of African American Islam depended in no small part on the Nation of Islam's institutional strength. Had Wallace D. Muhammad, or W. D. Mohammed, left the movement's main teachings in place after taking control of the movement in the 1975, over one hundred local congregations—by far the largest group of congregations in black America—would have remained outside the Sunni fold.

However, after taking the reins, Mohammed changed the religious doctrines of this historically African American movement and aligned it with Sunni Islamic tradition. Mohammed had been exposed as a teenager to Sunni Islam through Palestinian and Egyptian teachers at the University of Islam, the Nation of Islam's primary and secondary school in Chicago. As early as

1958, he introduced his own Qur'an-based teachings to Nation of Islam members in Philadelphia. When he was finally introduced as the movement's new leader at the annual Chicago convention on February 26, 1975, it was clear that a change was coming. In the following several years, he debunked the idea that his father was a prophet like Muhammad, the charge that white people were blue-eyed devils, and the belief that W .D. Fard was God. He introduced the U.S. flag into Nation of Islam mosques, changed the name of the organization to the World Community of al-Islam in the West, and negotiated a contract to supply ready-made meals to the U.S. government. By the 1980s, he frequently delivered lectures on the compatibility of Islamic religion with personal freedom, individualism, and democracy, asserting that these values were Islamic in nature. Mohammed grounded all of his teaching in the Qur'an and the Sunna, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. He advised his followers not to rely on him, but to rely on the Qur'an.

These teachings also affected the congregational life of African American Muslims outside the United States. Congregations in Belize and Bermuda, among other foreign countries, either converted their Nation of Islam congregations into Sunni ones or began new missions that responded to Mohammed's leadership. But not all of his followers accepted such changes, which led to a split in the movement in 1978. Minister Louis Farrakhan, who had become national spokesman for Elijah Muhammad after Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam in 1964, rejected W. D. Mohammed's radical reforms. Farrakhan reaffirmed his belief in the prophecy of Elijah Muhammad and the divinity of W.D. Fard. Calling his new organization the Nation of Islam, he set about rebuilding the movement. Eventually Minister Farrakhan established XXX congregations under his leadership. These congregations were new. For the most part, they were located in different buildings than the old Nation of Islam mosques, which were retained by W.

D. Mohammed's followers. In retrospect, the initial reports of a gigantic loss of membership in the original Nation of Islam--the one that transitioned to Sunni Islam--were incorrect. Despite press reports to the contrary, it is clear from data collected in the 2000 "Mosque in America" study that W. D. Mohammed's identification with Sunni Islam had attracted new members to his movement. Like other African American Muslims never associated with Elijah Muhammd's Nation of Islam, they were convinced that religious truth lay in the Sunni tradition.

By 2000, of the 332 black-majority or black-plurality mosques in the United States documented by the "Mosque in America" study, over half were associated with the leadership of W. D. Mohammed. The others were the fruit of the many local congregations and national groups already discussed here. From the First Cleveland Mosque and the State Street Mosque in Brooklyn to the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood and congregations associated with Darul Islam, the long history of independent, black-led mosques had resulted in the presence of at least 157 such congregations around the country. (208-209).

The study of these mosques, conducted by Ihsan Bagby, showed that African American Sunni congregations associated with W.D. Mohammed showed some important differences with those led mainly by South Asian and Arab Americans and with other black American Sunni mosques as well. First, unlike all other "denominations" of Sunni congregations in the United States, the W.D. Mohammed mosques were over-represented in the American South. Over 40 percent of them were in the South; two-fifths of the other Sunni congregations were located in the East, not the South. Moreover, women in W. D. Mohammed mosques were more likely to play leadership roles in their local congregations; a slightly larger percentage of them attended Friday congregational prayers than in the other mosques; and only 16 percent of the W.D. Mohammed mosques separated men and women with some kind of curtain or other barrier

during the Friday prayers. This latter statistic contrasted dramatically with South Asian- and Arab-led Sunni mosques in which 81 percent of the congregations used some sort of barrier between men and women. Finally, more than other African American, Arab, or South Asian Sunni congregations, W.D. Mohammed mosques reported having a strong sense of their ethnic heritage—by a margin of about 2 to 1. 214, 216-7, 224.

In their emphasis on the roles of women, the importance of ethnic heritage, and with an historic base in the South, one might be tempted to conclude that African American Sunni congregations might be better compared to African American Christian churches than other Muslim congregations. Though women were prevented from taking the pulpit in the early years of many black Baptist churches, for example, they became powerful figures in such churches through their work with women's auxiliaries, missions, and other platforms. The same was true for women in Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, a tradition that continued both in W.D. Mohammed's community and Louis Farrakhan's new Nation of Islam. Many African American Christian and later Muslim women have seen their interests in similar similar ways: they have hoped to advance both their religion and their race. This commitment to the religion and the race has translated in the era of the civil rights until present as a commitment to social justice. As of 2000, approximately 80 percent of all African American Sunni Muslim congregations said that they had a strong commitment to social justice—almost exactly the same percentage of African American churches. (231) Like other black religious congregations, African American Sunni congregations, whether associated with W.D. Mohammed or not, have played other roles similar to those of African American religious congregations more generally, not only providing space for ritual performance, ethical contemplation, and doctrinal learning, but also reaching out into

black communities to conduct prison programs, substance abuse prevention, and other social services.

By 2010, another major shift had occurred among black-majority and black-plurality Muslim congregations. This shift was a result of the large influx of African immigrants, visitors, and refugees. From 1865 to 1965, approximately 57,000 persons arrived in the United States from sub-Saharan Africa. By 2009, there were 965,330 African-born immigrants from West and East Africa alone.[i] From one third to one half were likely Muslim. Their presence altered U.S. culture as a whole but had an especially important impact in Muslim American congregational life. Ihsan Bagby's 2011 follow up to the 2001 study of Muslim congregations showed, for example, that the number of Sunni and Shia congregations in the United States had increased from 1,209 in to 2,106 in 2011. This near doubling of Muslim congregations continued to reflect the impact of institution-building among South Asian and Arab American Muslim, but Southeastern Europeans, especially Bosnians, and Africans, now played a significant role in the growth of Muslim congregations. At least nine percent of all Sunni and Shi'a attendees at Friday congregational prayers in the United States were from sub-Saharan Africa. While the number of congregations led by the followers of W.D. Mohammed and by historically Sunni African American Muslims declined to 23 percent of all mosques, Somalis and West Africans were now in charge of dozens, if not hundreds of mosques in the United States.(5, 14).

Should Somalis and West Africans be counted as black congregations? Clearly, some Somalis and other Africans from the Horn do not claim an African or black heritage, insisting that they are Arab instead. Moreover, even if many West Africans would categorize themselves as black, their most meaningful categories of ethnic identity come not from such racial terms, but from their national and linguistic identities and a historical consciousness very different from

that forged in the post-slavery United States. These ethnic and cultural differences often lead African-born Muslims in the United States to eschew mosques associated with W. D. Mohammed's teachings or with historically black Sunni msoques. In some cases, these Muslims become members of and/or give their financial and other support to mosques dominated by Arab and South Asian Americans. In others, they simply start their own congregations. This is exactlty what has happened in Indianapolis, Indiana, for example. Despite the presence of the Noor Islamic Center, a congregation run by a follower of W.D. Mohammed and Masjid al-Mu'mineen, which is operated by historically Sunni African American leaders such as Umar al-Khattab, most African-born Muslims attend the Cold Spring Road mosaque, which is run by an Algerian imam; the Haqq mosque, which is run by a West African imam; and the Sahaba mosque, a new congregation populated partly by Somali, Eretrean, and other East Africans in addition to Arabs, South Asians, and others.

In some other instances, the separation of African-born from American-born congregants on Fridays stems from a commitment among some West Africans especially to a particular Sufi order. This is especially the case of Senegalese speakers of Wolof and Pulaar who are often part of the Murudiyya, the Senegalese-based Sufi order. In New York, they drove cabs, braided hair, and opened restaurants, among other entrepreneurial activities. Around 116th and 117th streets in Harlem they established an area called Little Africa or Le Petit Senegal. Senegalese Muslims successfully lobbied City Hall in the 1990s for a Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Day, honoring the Senegalese saint and national hero credited with establishing the Murid Sufi order. On July 28 each year since then, hundreds of Senegalese, Gambian, and other West African Muslims march down 7th Avenue in Harlem to Central Park, exclaiming in Arabic that “there is no god but God.”

By 2004, West African Muslims had established over 20 mosques in in the city. These mosques often reflected the varieties of Islamic religion that could be found in West Africa. Masjid Aksa, which used rented space at the corner of Frederick Douglass Boulevard and 116th Street in Harlem, was led by a Sunni imam, or religious leader, from Ivory Coast who delivered sermons in Arabic, English, French, and Mande to a crowd from Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Burkina, Mali, Sierra Leone, the Middle East, and the United States. Also Sunni in nature but focusing on a Sufi interpretation of Islam was the Tijani Sufi order in the Bronx established in 1995 by followers of Senegalese Sufi teacher Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (1900-1975).

In many instances there is tension or misunderstanding between these Muslim New Yorkers and the Muslim New Yorkers who can trace their roots to figures such as Daoud Ahmed Faisal and Malcolm X. But this is not always the case, and in other locales, there is some evidence that there are productive exchanges and encounters leading to congregations that are home to both African American and African Sunni Muslims. In Cleveland, for example, where African Muslim immigrants are smaller in number, many of them have integrated with the long-standing Sunni African American Muslim community. In the 1980s, religious teacher Masoud Laryea of Ghana was chosen to lead the prayers on Islamic holidays when many of Cleveland's Muslims, from a variety of backgrounds, would come together to pray. Religious leader Ali Omar of Nigeria became imam of Masjid al-Haqq, the "Mosque of Truth," in 1993 and then became principal of the school connected to the mosque. In 1997, he then became principal of the Cleveland Community Islamic School.

One of the results of African integration into existing Muslim institutions in Cleveland has been the proliferation of Sunni African religious influences in the practice of Islam among African-American Muslims. This include the spread of Sufi Islamic traditions, which for the vast

majority of Muslims, especially in West Africa, are mainstream Sunni practices, often indistinguishable from one another. African American Muslim religious leader Daud Abdul Malick, for example, became interested in the Tijani Sufi order after Senegalese Muslims began attending Masjid al-Haqq, which he led. By the 1990s, he had traveled to the Tijani center at Kaolack, Senegal; invited Tijani leader Hassan Cisse to lecture in Cleveland; and in 1995, hired seven teachers from Africa to work at the Islamic school he ran. Similarly, Hussein Akram, the son of Sunni African-American Muslim pioneer Wali Akram (1904-1994), became attracted to the Murid Sufi order in the 1990s, and established a *zawiya*, or Sufi circle, devoted to its followings at the First Cleveland Mosque.

Now whether such blending will come to characterize African American Muslim Sunni congregations as a whole is unclear. But as the children of immigrants grow up in cities such as New York, Cleveland, Minneaplis, Chicago, Boston, Houston, and Atlanta, the socializing forces may alter their sense of belonging and history. The sons and daughters of Africans may come to see themselves as African Americans as they find ways to combat racism and unequal opportunity, and these social forces may end up pushing the children of Africa into the same congregations as those of black America. Certainly, this has occurred in African American churches, where none other than President Barack Obama, the son of an African student, came to identity strongly with the historical struggles of black America and African American Christianity's role in that history. A similar process might take place for the children of the large wave of Muslim immigrants who arrived from African in the new millennium.

This analysis depends, of course, on the continued salience of race in U.S. society and culture. For some, Barack Obama’s election and demographic trends have portended the end of racialization in the United States. Talk of a post-racial America imagines a country where racial

identity no longer affects one's life opportunities, including access to health care, functioning schools, credit, and jobs. But counter-trends such as widening wealth disparities between black and non-blacks, increased residential segregation, the prison-industrial complex, and dramatically-high unemployment rates for African Americans speak of a different reality, of a country still bonded to its slave past. If this past is prologue, then historically black religious congregations, including Muslim ones, are likely to remain a viable institutional response to racism.

---

[i] http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=847#8

Sources

D'Alisera, JoAnn. *An Imagined Geography: Sierra Leoneans in the United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

Diouf, Sylviane A. "The West African Paradox." In *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square*, edited by Zahid H. Bukhari et al., 268-295. Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2004.

Grieco, Elizabeth. “The African Foreign-Born in the United States.” Migration Immigration Source, http://www.migrationinformation.org/Usfocus/display.cfm?ID=250#3 (accessed March 10, 2009).

Lo, Mbaye. *Muslims in America: Race, Politics, and Community Building*. Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 2004.

Nyang, Sulayman S. “Continental African Muslim Immigrants in the United States.” In *Muslims in the West: from Sojourners to Citizens*, edited by Yvonne Y. Haddad, 250-261. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.