
A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Statistics indicate that the Muslim population in Britain stands at 3.3 million, according to the 2018 Annual Population Survey (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Statistics also indicate 10% of the Muslim demographic could be categorised as 'Black Caribbean' or 'Black African.' British Muslims in Numbers (Ali, 2014), a study published by the MCB notes that the ethnic diversity is increasing. While the proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims is falling, the proportion of Muslims who identify as 'Black African, Black other' and 'Asian other' is rising. The 'Black Muslim' demographic is constituted by a great diversity including Muslims from Somalia, Jamaica, Nigeria, Trinidad, as well as Mandinka speakers whose heritage cuts across West Africa (including the Ivory Coast, Gambia and Senegal). The biggest group of Black Muslims describe themselves as Black African (7.7% of the total Muslim population in the UK); a substantial proportion of these are Somali, but no definitive number is available (Balagan et al, 2018).

Further context on inequality is evident through a comparison of household wealth. The median household wealth in the UK was £205,000; for Muslim households, the median was £42,000. This seems to be closely related to differences in wealth between different ethnic groups (the median for Bangladeshis is £15,000 and for Black Africans £21,000, while for Pakistanis it is £97,000 and for Indians £204,000) (Balagan et al, 2018).

An important study in 2019 reveals some of the experiences of Black Muslims; the Black Muslim Forum (2019) conducted a study in which it found a majority of respondents experienced racism (79%, and a nearly 50% of respondents said that they also experienced racism from within Muslim communities). Worryingly, a majority felt they did not belong to the mosque, and 84% expressed that they felt they did not belong to their university's Islamic society (Black Muslim Forum, 2020).

CENTRAL CONCEPTS AND THEMES

This report was inspired by a gathering of scholars, practitioners, and members of Muslim communities. The conference in 2019 raised important questions that shape the themes and topics of this collection of essays. Identity, community, heritage, and inequality are prominent themes throughout the essays presented in this report.

Several speakers raised the issue of identity. Professor Kamil Omoteso argued that "in the UK it is an umbrella for anybody who is not a Caucasian mainly." Omoteso argues that Black is an identity, a form of recognition.

Dr. Mohammad Zakariya, an academic and educator, took the question further, provoking an important question about unity. In his presentation, he asked, what does it mean to be 'African?' He referred to the different ways Black Caribbean British and African British are seen, and linked the two. He challenged narrow conceptual terminology and presented a broad term that encompasses Black British Muslims. "If it is continued to identify only one group as African and another group as Black, then there won't be any true unity amongst us." Connecting a number of seemingly disparate communities in a discursive and historical space,

Shiekh Danjuma Bihari linked the current status of British Black Muslims with cross-Atlantic connections. "There is a connection with North America and the United Kingdom, there is a connection with the United Kingdom and Africa, principally West Africa and there is a connection, of course, with the Caribbean." Importantly, he links disparate communities bound together by race, history, and faith.

In his presentation, Ismael Lea South grounded Black Muslim communities in Britain's history. He reminded the audience that Black Muslims have travelled to, worked in, and contributed to British society for hundreds of years, not least during the Tudor period. "The Black British Muslim legacy is vibrant and unique." He celebrates the combined British, Black (African and Black Caribbean) and Muslim identities. Black Muslims have lived, worked, and contributed to British society in different ways for centuries. The case was made for recognising and highlighting the work of Black Muslim pioneers and the documenting and archiving that has recently started. There are implications of this work for 'belonging' as well as for youth.

Thinking through the central themes of identity, community, heritage, several sub-themes emerged around identity and 'difference.' Speakers argued that differences should be identified, understood, and tolerated rather than suppressed as was the case in the 1980s and 1990s. Equality and inclusion are similarly highlighted to remedy a history of what one speaker called 'cultural supremacy.' Thus, structural inequality and racism were key themes. A recommendation put forward is to foster collaboration, communication and building networks across communities.

Hudda Khaireh, an independent researcher and artist, links an historical analysis with a contemporary critique of race relations. She argued that the colour of one's skin remains the basis for social hierarchy. Importantly, she brings seemingly disparate communities into dialogue, linked not only by faith as well as by their historical relationship to European imperialism. "It's the creation of the Caribbean, it's the creation of the Americas that we know today. And many of our Muslim brothers and sisters who come from the Caribbean, come with that history." For Hudda, being Black and the story of slavery are intertwined, and looking forward, argues that our challenge is acceptance and recognition.

Further, a possible need for a 'third-space' or 'African and Black Caribbean only spaces' was also an underlying recourse in all of the discussions at the conference. In response to exclusion from Black Caribbean spaces and Muslim spaces, artist and presenter Sakinah Le Noir recounts how her parents' generation were "forced to create and find their own communities and spaces that celebrated and acknowledged our rich Caribbean culture and history, but at the same time had a space where we were able to practise our Islam in its entirety." Inculcating a Muslim identity that was grounded in Britain and inclusive of cultural traditions led to the formation of identity. Acknowledging this cultural intervention is the focus of The Black and Muslim in Britain Project. Le Noir produced and curated a series of published videos that explore religion, culture, and identity. "One of the many reasons why we were inspired to do this was to provide a platform that would contribute to the preservation of our stories. As a Black community we don't just have one voice. We all come from different cultures, different races, and that's something that we should definitely celebrate."

Looking ahead and anticipating debates and questions unique to Black Muslim women in Britain, Khadija Kuku, an entrepreneur, presents her attempt to create that space online through podcasting and social media. “I basically just wanted to create a space where I felt like we would be able to voice our opinions and talk about situations and experiences that aren’t often spoken about.” Her effort is the creation of discursive space and an opportunity for the development of community for women. Khadija explains that it is an effort of Black Muslim women to “mark our territory and let them know that we are here to stay.”

Two community organisers, Railu Ladidi Tihamiyu and Mujida Mebude representing Federation of Muslim Women in UK, respond to questions and challenges of the development of community institutions. Railu spoke about serious challenges for families, women, and youth in Britain and the challenge of involving the active participation and collaboration of women and men.

In her presentation, Mujida Mebude, the Secretary General of the Federation of Muslim Women in UK (FOMWA UK) noted the importance of the mosque in helping the family to develop within the Black Muslim community. She shared her experience working with women across the Nigerian Muslim community as well as her experience raising her children as a young mother and the impact the Old Kent Road Mosque played as a support system within the community. “The mosque supported me in nurturing my children through the madrassa and the different engagement activities.”

Conference speakers introduced critical themes that each author in this report responds to from the perspective of their unique experience. The essays presented in this report present a nuanced picture of the contributions Black British Muslims are making to society, the barriers they face, and the ways they are overcoming them. Each essay serves as an important account and analysis into a specific area by professionals and community leaders who speak to these issues with depth of expertise and knowledge.

Established categories shape how we understand aspects of our society but they also limit our understanding. This collection of essays serves to create new linkages and categories, providing new ideas and valuable insight. The perspectives of those who have conducted research and provided accounts shed new light on entrenched issues and barriers we face in Britain.



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SECTION 3

PERSPECTIVES - THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MUSLIMS IN THE UK