

EXPLORING WHAT IS POSSIBLE

BY NA'IMA B. ROBERT

Below I will examine the origins of the first online Black Muslim Festival, a historic collaboration between Black Muslims on either side of the Atlantic and the African continent. Held during Black History Month 2020, it was dubbed 'Black Muslim Renaissance.' I will look at what made this event groundbreaking and what we hope the implications of the success of the festival will be.

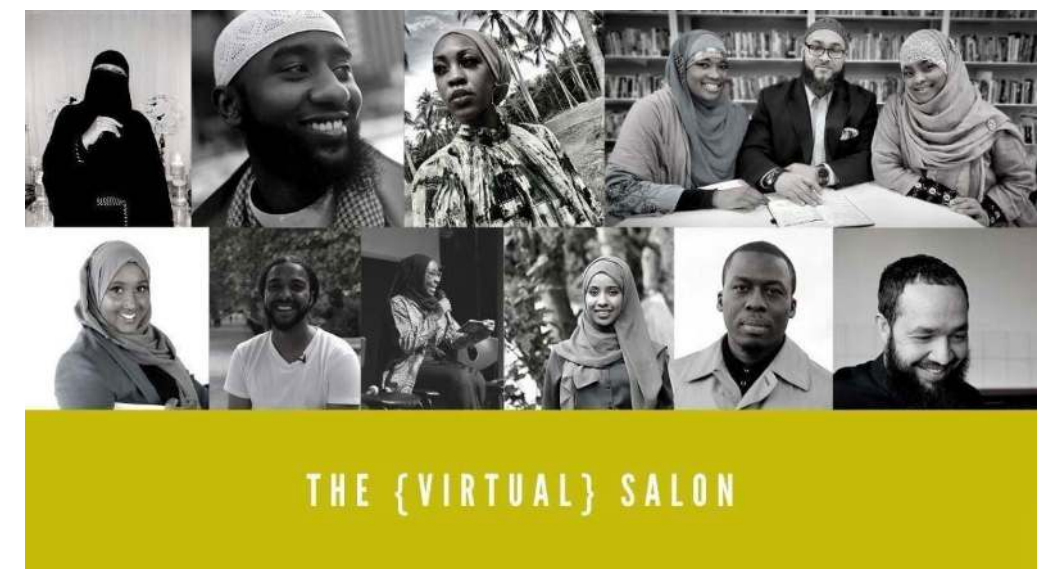
A PROACTIVE RESPONSE

In the months following the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the world, several important conversations started happening in the Muslim community. On TV shows, webinars, online discussion forums and conferences, discussion about the issue of racism and anti-Blackness increased, even on stages and in places where such topics would not have been entertained before the culmination of events before and after the killing of George Floyd in America in the summer of 2020.

After several years of activism behind the scenes, in curated spaces like Hafsa Dabiri's Discovery Show, the seminal documentary series 'Black + Muslim in Britain' and created spaces within institutions, such as the Proudly Muslim and Black Symposium, the issue of racism and anti-Blackness within the Muslim community had gone mainstream.

Everyone was talking about it.

It was in this climate that the first {VIRTUAL} Salon discussion show was born, hosted and curated by myself. We kicked off with the topic of the day: 'Black Lives Matter? At the Intersection of Race and Religion.' The panel discussion featured a vast array of community leaders, scholars, activists and creatives, including Boonaa Mohammed, Hafsa Dabiri, Michael Mumisa, Habeeb Akande and others and became a weekly event. It was this discussion format that led to the creation of the first online Black Muslim Festival in October 2020.



The line-up for the first {VIRTUAL} Salon discussion..jpg

COMMUNITY RECOGNITION

The Black Muslim Festival was billed as ‘a celebration of the Black Muslim heritage, culture and experience and served to not only uplift Muslims of African descent worldwide, but to offer an intriguing cultural experience for non-Black audiences.’

Set to run throughout October, it represented an essential contribution to the narrative of Black history and Black identity in the UK, one that often excludes the voices of Black Muslims. Indeed, The Voice, a Black British newspaper, was one of the first media outlets to cover the festival, a rare recognition of Black Muslims as part of the wider Black British community.

Indeed, the Black Muslim Festival is notable because it has garnered the support, not only of Black Muslims from the UK, USA, Canada and the African continent but also non-Black Muslim and mainstream media. Apart from The Voice, articles and interviews about the festival appeared in The Guardian, Metro, Al Jazeera, TRT World and the Indonesian newspaper, Republika, as well as some of the most popular Islamic media sites: The Muslim Vibe, Islam Channel, British Muslim Magazine and mvslim.com.

BLACK MUSLIM RENAISSANCE
The Black Muslim Festival
2-25 October 2020
OVER 40 WORLD-CLASS SPEAKERS

Seminars
Workshops
Interviews
Showcases
Panel discussions
and more...

Na'ima B. Robert
Boonaa Mohammed
Sh. Abdullah Hakeem Quick
The Village Auntie
Maryam Lemu & Sa'id Takuma
Rufus & Jenny Triplett
Alhan Islam
LaYinka Sanni

For tickets & programme, visit bit.ly/blackmuslimfestival
@blackmuslimfestival

The main poster for the Black Muslim Festival.jpg

Black Muslims are almost invisible in Britain, but now we're carving out a space *Na'ima B Robert*

As a minority within a minority, we often feel like we don't belong - but that is beginning to change



▲ Mo Farah on his way to winning the Men's 10,000m gold medal at the 2012 Olympics. Photograph: Owen Humphreys/PA

Ask most people to visualise a Muslim and they will likely picture someone of Asian or Arab descent, with a beard, perhaps, or some sort of head covering. Certainly, this is typically the image that is portrayed across our social media feeds, front pages and TV screens.

Feature in The Guardian.jpg

In the wake of a concerted public relations campaign, in which the organisers reached out via personal and professional networks, several Muslim charities were quick to offer support and sponsorship, including the Muslim Council of Britain, Muslim Hands, Mercy Mission and My Adoption Family, allowing speakers to be compensated and staff hours paid for. This is an important and crucial development in the Black African and African Caribbean Muslims (BAACBM) journey towards inclusion in the wider Muslim community: securing moral and financial support from non-Black members of the Muslim community shows that our contributions are seen as valuable.

THE GLOBAL BLACK MUSLIM IDENTITY

Another notable difference between the Black Muslim Festival and other similar events is the international nature of the line-up. Scholars, academics, activists, creatives and experts, in a diverse range of disciplines, from the UK, US, Canada, and the African continent, were all featured on the programme. The audience was similarly diverse, with the UK boasting the highest numbers of registrants, followed by Nigeria, the United States, Canada, then South

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Africa. In addition, the audience included many non-Black participants from all over the world, many of whom took part in the healthy and healing discussions in the Facebook group. Well over 3,000 people registered for the free festival pass and hundreds of tickets were purchased.

BLACK MUSLIM RENAISSANCE: OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

Black Muslims in the diaspora have different histories and realities and rarely if ever, get the opportunity to ‘compare notes’ and share experiences, leading to a lack of familiarity with areas of connection and areas of difference.

It emerged that BAACBM speakers from the West espouse the notion of a socio-political form of Blackness that is defined by the racism it encounters as well as the oppression it has endured, and insist that this form of racial identity is not in conflict with one’s identity as a Muslim.

Many speakers, both from the diaspora and from the continent, express the desirability of a Pan-African approach to facilitate dialogue and cooperation although Black Muslims in the diaspora have a very different definition of Blackness to Africans on the continent. However, African Muslims, particularly in countries where they are a majority or, at least a powerful minority, they experience a particular type of privilege which sets them apart from Black Muslims abroad.

Issues such as the distortion of African history and the erasure of Africans from Islamic history, in particular, affect all groups, whether from the continent or abroad. The globalised world we now live in means that racist structures, ideas and stereotypes affect all people of African descent, mainly once they set foot outside of Africa and become a ‘minority,’ and therefore, must be tackled as one body. Collaboration and cooperation between Black Muslims abroad and on the continent can lead to a greater sense of connection and unity, leading to the upliftment of the collective and a sense of pride and confidence in BAACBM.

CONCLUSION

Although not the first Black Muslim event by any means, the Black Muslim Festival has opened up new possibilities as far as the development of the BAACBM community is concerned.

With the post-lockdown world now comfortable with online events and the increased accessibility that they offer; The Muslim world is waking up to the need to support and celebrate those so often sidelined or confined to the nasheed stage. Also, with Black Muslims reclaiming their identity and history, and with links being made across continents, finally the world is starting to take notice. Therefore, it is reasonable to hope that this festival is only the first of many such events.

Will this festival become an annual fixture? Will it get bigger and better? Will smaller events continue to be held throughout the year? Will books, magazines, podcasts and documentaries follow in its wake? The answer to all these questions is, of course: Insha Allah (God Willing). We certainly hope so.



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Na'ima B. Robert is an award-winning author of diverse children's literature and founder of Muslimah Writers, a project dedicated to helping Muslim women to write and publish their work. The Black Muslim Festival is her first major event.