



HABEEB AKANDE

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IS THERE A SPACE FOR BLACK MUSLIMS AT UNIVERSITY?

BY BASHIRAT OLADELE

It is easy to feel like an outsider at university as a Black Muslim. It can be overwhelming not to find people with similar interests or from the same demographic at university, where you meet people from all parts of the world. This continues to be a common experience for Black Muslims in the UK. This experience is not limited to the wider university environment, but it is also present within the Black community at the universities. Raifa Rafiq, the author of 'It's Not About the Burqa' wrote that she was always the 'sore thumb' when with her Black friends (Rafiq, 2019:201) and this is a perfect description for the majority of Black Muslims at their university's African Caribbean Society. This feeling acts as a form of segregation within African Caribbean Societies as it actively isolates Black Muslims, displaying the narrative that Blackness is conditional or that Islam is not compatible with Blackness. This is flawed and is a structural problem as many Black Muslims at universities remain frustrated by this.

It is important to note that societies such as the African Caribbean Society or Nigerian Society are focused on culture, rather than religion. Despite this, we need to be aware of how these cultural societies are dismissive of Black Muslims such as the assumption that all Black people are Christians. For example, cultural societies are a way of meeting new people and taking a break from the university workload but this can be overpowered by the excessive drinking culture at university that remains incompatible with Islamic principles. Likewise, African Caribbean societies tend to have Christian undertones by constantly speaking about Christian figures, failing to realise that Black Muslims do exist and are being marginalised and having the leaders of these societies being Christians allows this to happen.

In a similar vein, Islamic societies (ISOCs) are in need of a structural change due to the lack of acknowledgement of Black Muslims either from the anti-Black statements or silence when tragedy is afflicted on the Black community. This is evidenced by a 2020 report conducted by Black Muslim Forum (2020) on the experiences of Black British Muslims whereby 84% of interviewed Black Muslims reported that they felt they did not belong to their university's ISOC. This is a statistic that was shocking to many non-Black Muslims - prolifically shared on social media and which mobilised several university ISOCs to take action. Amongst them was the University of Birmingham ISOC which went on to conduct independent research on the systemic problems within their Islamic society in order to spur change and undo legacies of racism within the sphere of the Islamic society.

Organisations such as the Black Muslim Forum and The Black Muslim Girl are spaces that allow Black Muslims to simply exist without having to deal with the flaws of Islamic societies or African Caribbean societies. Spaces needed to be created that allow Black Muslims at university to exist and feel secure within their faith and cultures as Black Muslims. ACM Connect (African Caribbean Muslims Connect) was created in August 2020 as an initiative that aims to reduce the marginalisation of Black Muslims at university, by creating our own spaces. At the moment, ACM Connect is based at the University of Warwick with ambassadors across British universities and aims to have branches at numerous universities to support Black Muslims on campus.

BASHIRAT OLADELE

Bashirat Oladele is an award winning 19 year old Law and Sociology student at the University of Warwick, with a passion for writing and telling the stories that often go unheard. She regularly writes for the student newspaper, 'The Boar' and has been featured in British Vogue. Bashirat has written for the likes of Teen Vogue, Stylist, Cosmopolitan and many more publications. She is passionate about the diversity of the global Black Muslim experience.

