

Media practice among the African and Black Caribbean British Muslims is very distinct yet grossly underreported and less celebrated. Where the people consider the general institutions as not serving their peculiar needs in terms of faith, race and economic interests, where they feel the system is leaving their personal stories untold, the significance of a strategic struggle for relevance cannot be overemphasised. Hence the challenges, achievements and prospects of such people in the media-sphere, which this section of the report attends to, shall make a good read.

NICHE OR PIGEONHOLE: POSITIONALITY OF THE BLACK BRITISH MUSLIM IN THE MEDIA

BY AMANDLA THOMAS-JOHNSON

The Black Muslim does not always have it easy. Positioned across two of Britain's most marginalised minorities, they can be viewed as not sufficiently belonging to either. Not corresponding to the dominant stereotypes of Blackness or Islam, they can easily be overlooked.

Their position between communities also grants them a sort of innate cosmopolitanism, able to maneuver between the Black barber shop in Brixton and the curry house on Brick Lane. Through art, music, and poetry, a new generation of Black Muslims have recast what it means to be Black and Muslim in today's Britain, drawing on rich Somali poetry traditions or on their experiences as Caribbean converts to Islam.

In fact, through faith, race and shared histories, the Black Muslim can access a global geography that runs from Barbados to Beirut to Brunei, and from Cape Town to Conakry to Cardiff.

Given the heightened interest in Islam and the recent eruption of Black Lives Matter, I want to draw on my experiences to suggest that this global awareness makes a Black Muslim journalist uniquely placed to take on some of the enduring stories of our time.

However, they are required to be strategic in order to navigate what is essentially a volatile media and political landscape. Just as quickly as opportunities present themselves, they can be snatched away.

I was born in London to African Caribbean parents and converted to Islam at 15, months before 9/11 took place and the war on terror began, events that would shape my life for many years to come.

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My journalistic instincts were shaped by my parents' Pan-Africanism, two years spent on the central committee of the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) and a year as an elected trustee of National Union of Students (NUS) among other experiences.

These experiences, coupled with my awareness of Islamic injunctions to stand up for justice and my commitment to accurate and balanced reporting meant I knew early on what sort of journalist I wanted to be: I believed that the purpose of journalism, as the famous maxim went, was to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

My first full-time job in journalism was at the Islam Channel, a Muslim community television station based in London. Despite being in an overwhelmingly Muslim environment, I was one of

the few Black Muslims. I worked on stories from across the Muslim world - from the Rohingya to the wars in Syria and Libya. But there were few stories about Africa even though the channel's largest audience was in Nigeria.

This gave me an opportunity to pitch original content while catering to a key audience. I didn't know much about Somalia, Mozambique or Nigeria to begin with, but given my background I had an interest and cared deeply about how Africa was reported on.

I soon learnt that even though I might have been a British-born Black Muslim, a tiny minority in the media, I was also connected to a billion people in Africa and tens of millions of others throughout the Americas and Caribbean, people who were often underrepresented in the media landscape. It seemed like a no brainer to focus my attention here.

Later on, as a freelancer, I was forced to think seriously about ways to find original stories. I came to rely on the fact that my identity potentially granted me advantageous entry points into a number of communities. My parents were immigrants and as a person of colour I shared with millions of others a past that had been shaped by colonialism, empire and racism.

I wrote for a Black newspaper about the UK's Montserratian community and about an African literature festival. I worked on a Vice documentary about the Muslim vote. I expanded my horizons, taking an interest in everything from English Traveller communities to refugees fleeing war.

I was not automatically welcome everywhere. Mistrust of journalists runs high in many communities. And a Black journalist is sometimes considered an unknown quantity. Women have it even harder.

I had to put the work in to build trust - turn up to community events, hang around chatting afterwards, and take down phone numbers. I had to be persistent and sometimes annoying. The freelancer must write in order to eat.

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Stories are the currency of the media. If you want to get on and build a career then you best find them. When I entered the mainstream media, certain Muslim-related stories were worth their weight in gold. There was a frenzy about British foreign fighters going off to Syria and the rise of the Islamic State group.

A central question loomed over the heads of all Muslim journalists: to what extent do we associate ourselves with Muslim-related stories? A Muslim journalist with access to particularly newsworthy sections of the community could get ahead by focusing there. But they risked becoming the ‘Muslim journalist,’ the one who is the foremost authority on all things Islamic but is hindered from doing anything else. Different journalists responded to this differently. Some avoided Muslim issues like the plague, favouring a more ‘mainstream’ career advancement; others mastered the Muslim beat.

I feared being pigeon-holed but I also feared that Muslims would continue to be misrepresented unless I did my bit. I had in part come into journalism to give another side to the Muslim story. I realised that the terrifying depiction of Muslims on tabloid front pages was a useful diversion from us having frank public debates about foreign policy, racism and Islamophobia and a convenient excuse to dismantle human rights protections, strip citizenship, scapegoat immigrants, and ramp up surveillance - things that affected all of us in some way - not just Muslims.

I dived into some of the more sensitive topics regarding Muslims, taking care to carefully humanise those I reported on. My work around former Guantanamo detainees and foreign fighters in Syria earned me significant bylines and attracted commissions and employment from the likes of the BBC and Channel 4, where I was an investigative journalism trainee. At the same time I also tried to take on other work that spoke to issues facing people of colour more widely, such as racism in football, keeping my options open.

Many of the Black Muslims I know in the media have also gone ‘back home’ to report - to countries they fled from as refugees (like Somalia) or to where their parents emigrated from, which in my case was Trinidad and Tobago. This experience is as much about ensuring that one narrates one’s own stories as well as an opportunity to connect with roots. I make no apology for using journalism as a way to explore my personal curiosities and my own identity. For those of us from immigrant backgrounds, negotiating between cultures, places and identities in the West, going back home can be a profound experience.

In 2018, I moved to Dakar, Senegal from where I cover West Africa, mainly for Aljazeera and Middle East Eye. I am one of the few Black foreign journalists working in the region. My white peers fit the profile of what an international journalist is supposedly meant to look like and appear to have certain advantages in terms of official access. I have played to my strengths. This part of the world is overwhelmingly Black African and predominantly Muslim. I look at the region with different eyes and see racism in Mauritania; colonialism in Western Sahara; the erroneous narrative of senseless ‘Muslim terror’ in Mali.

The longer I remain out here, the further away Europe drifts from the centre of my geographical axis. I try to tell stories from a local perspective, an attempt to avoid placing Europe at the centre of events and describing Africa or Islam in relation to it.

My shift to a more global south perspective - as Britain lurches to the right - had me wondering whether I could write again for a mainstream British publication. But the recent eruption of the Black Lives Matter protests has now opened up a space to write about race, empire and slavery. And once again, the Black Muslim is well-placed to cover this. For how long is anyone’s guess.



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