
Religion is the core of spirituality for many people. Muslims of all hues carry their religion with them wherever they go, because Islam is not just a religion. It is a way of life which combines the law with spirituality, the social with the economics, personal discipline with collective responsibility.

In this section, we take a brief overview of the journey of Islam in the UK from the perspectives of the African and Black Caribbean Muslims as a community. Of course, decades before the Empire Windrush set sail, there were east African Muslim sailors and other Black Muslims who preceded them, whose communities were not formed as they are today.

We gain insight into how Islam evolved within the Black communities especially in London from where it spread elsewhere in the UK. We also appreciate the various roles of mosques managed by the African communities play in interfaith and integrational activities, community building and personal development. They provide not only a spiritual centre, but a place for connection, a safe place for solace and support.

The Covid-19 pandemic of the year 2020 witnessed lockdown and a devastating impact on the mental and social wellbeing. Religious institutions including mosques played supportive roles to uplift spirits bright and retain hope.

Thus, the following is a snapshot of our community in the last 50 years in the UK.

THE BLACK MUSLIM PRESENCE IN BRITAIN

BY SHEIKH DANJUMA BIHARI

To consider the history of the Black Muslim presence in Britain, it is necessary to go back further than the Windrush. In the UK there were Black Muslim communities that ante-dated the arrival of African Caribbeans in the 1950s and 60s. Many were Somali seamen who settled in the port cities like Cardiff, from the early 1900s when Aden was occupied by the British controlling the southern gate of the Red Sea⁴⁷, as they controlled the northern gate where it meets the Mediterranean Sea by means of the Suez Canal. With the arrival of African Caribbeans who were nearly all Christian in confession, Muslim converts began to appear as early as the 1950s. These conversions were influenced by what was happening in other Afro-Diasporan communities in North America and in the Caribbean. Even before the Windrush, Caribbean emigration to North America, which had begun about 50 years earlier, would influence developments that would change the character of Afro-America which would in turn have an impact upon the UK's African Caribbean community throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In North America there was a discernible Caribbean contribution to the early heterodoxies that were to transmogrify into the Islam that is acceptable to the majority of the *ummah* today.

The spiritual search of the doubly-displaced has not proceeded in straight lines. Instead it has followed the warp and weft of the crisscrossing of the Atlantic - a journey of rediscovery and new beginnings. The double displacement of the African Caribbean, first through transAtlantic slavery and later, the Windrush to the UK, did find echoes in the migration of the African Americans of the southern states plantations to the factories of the north. Both communities of Afro-Diasporans shared the experience of 'the twice removed.' Many leaders of the early movements were the first generation offspring of African Caribbean migrants to North America. One of the foremost was Al Hajj Malik ash-Shabazz Omowale, better known as Malcolm X. And indeed the early movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam were influenced by pioneers of pan-Africanism like Marcus Mosiah Garvey from Jamaica. Garvey's motto 'One God, One Aim, One Destiny' is said to have been formalised after meetings with the Egypto-Sudanese journalist and pan Africanist, Duse' Mohammed Ali, whom he met while living in London (Arif, 2018).

Many of the African Caribbeans who came over to the UK with the Windrush would therefore have had family members already established in North America. Triangulated trans-Atlantic relationships would be responsible for disseminating forms of Islam, among other ideas, between North America, the UK, and the Caribbean.

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⁴⁷ Gillat-Ray, S and Mellor, J. (2012). Bila'd al-Welsh (Land of the Welsh): Muslims in Cardiff, South Wales: past, present and future. Muslim World, 100, 452 - 475.

The first wave of Caribbean Muslims in the UK were attracted to Islam as much because of its discipline, as because of its potential to furnish them with an alternative to the identity that had been imposed on them through 300 years of chattel slavery. It was to provide a structure to the day as well as the week; it was to encourage disciplined, clean and healthy living, to eschew smoking, stimulants, strong drink, gambling and dissipation. Around this time - the sixties and the seventies - there were two religiously-based ideologies competing for the soul of Black Britain. The more dynamic of the two was the Rastafari Movement, which had its origins in the Jamaica of the 1930s; around the same time as the rise of the Nation of Islam in the US. Given its emotional proximity and more immediate relevance, the Rastafari movement was to prove irresistible, with its conspicuous symbolism and Bible-based ideology powered by the drum and bass of reggae music - not just to Black British community but to every class of British society, turning London into the reggae capital of the world.

Islam had to wait in the wings until a certain amount of disenchantment set in with what were perceived as the lax mores of some elements of the Rastafarian movement. Many of those who were to utter the shahada in the 70s were former Rastafarians. The most evocative example was of the two Jamaican brothers Abubakr and Omar, along with their cousin Sulayman. They had decided to land on the coast of West Africa, determined to walk barefoot, eastwards to Ethiopia, the soles of the feet never out of contact with African soil, in order 'to beard the lion in his den;' seeking out H.I.M Emperor Haile Selassie I, to ask him in person if he were truly God incarnate, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah mentioned in the Book of Revelation. They had got no further than the Gambia when walking inland, they heard the *athaan*⁴⁸ emanating from several mosques in all directions. They entered, enthralled by the sound and no sooner had they lent an enquiring ear to the milling crowds of Mandinka Muslims than they converted to Islam. The Jamaican brothers returned with their cousin to the UK and Omar, who was to die of cancer a few years later, gave over his accommodation at #25, Bellefields Road, Brixton, to the early Caribbean convert community for use as a mosque. It was among the earliest, though by no means the first of the centres of worship established by the Caribbean convert community.

Many of the early brothers and sisters were influenced by Rastafari, others by the reverberations of the Nation of Islam in the person of Cassius Clay who, by the time of his visit to the UK, was already known as Muhammad Ali. Islam seemed to offer more structure and ordering; a contrast to the Bob Marley lyric (from the track 'Jamming') that seemed to have become the prevailing *modus vivendi*: 'Ain't no rules, ain't no vows; you can do it anyhow.' Many, like Saadullah, the first Caribbean convert to Islam on record, continued for a time to straddle both faiths. Saadullah Reefa of Trinidad had arrived here in 1956. Like many Windrushers seeking an identity in a hostile environment, he had come under the influence of Rastafari but not much later, perhaps 1958, he converted to Islam. Soon after, Saadullah took himself off to Egypt and the Levant, in particular occupied Palestine and Lebanon.

Meanwhile in the UK, as greater orthodoxy enveloped the Caribbean converts, first by dint of association with the UK's heritage communities, as well as Islamic missionary organisations

⁴⁸ Call to prayer

from Saudi Arabia, the ecumenical tendencies of some converts came under increasing pressure towards religious purification. Among the UK-based Caribbean convert community, Wahhabism had taken root and the Sufi orientation had become *religio non grata*; its dwindling adherents among the Naqshbandi tariqa or the Ansaaru Allah Jamaat -, the latter an African American sect that derived its inspiration from the Mahdi family and the Umma Party of the Sudan.

Three main centres were established around the same time: the one least-remembered was established near what was then the North Peckham Estate in south-east London. Perhaps the earliest one was Masjid Ar Ruju'a in North Kensington, where Saadullah was the 'amir' and Shaykh Salah Jannah the Imam. Shaykh Salah hailed from Sierra Leone. He had completed his Master's in Islamic studies in Saudi Arabia and was deputised to work among the converting communities of inner-city London.

The congregation of Masjid Ar Ruju'a was based in a squat, founded in approximately 1980, drawing congregants from the 'Frontline,' on All Saints Road. Located around the corner from the famous Mangrove Restaurant owned by Frank Crichlow, the mosque was near the heart of what was then a thriving Black British community. According to Abu Bakr James (2018) and author Ishmahil Blagrove, the mosque was on St Luke's Mews, catering to a largely African Caribbean congregation. Muhammad Khaja remembers the significance of the mosque for the community. "This mosque was a hub of support, cultural centre and empowerment of Black Muslims. They made good connections world-wide who supported their cause (Khaja, 2018)."

Though the mosque no longer exists, Blagrove (2021) highlights the role the mosque played in the larger Black British community around the Frontline in the early 1980s. For example, he refers to the manner in which congregants confronted growing drug use and gambling.

The community around the mosque disintegrated in the late 1980s, by which time, the ICM was created in Brixton partly with the help of civil rights activists like Linda Bellos.

Mention must also be made of African Muslims of heritage communities directly from the African continent. Unlike Pakistanis or Bangladeshis, African Muslims never settled in large enough concentrations to form distinct Muslim enclaves. With the possible exception of Yoruba Muslims in Southwark, the rest were dotted about London indistinguishable from their non-Muslim countrymen. Until the establishment of the Central Mosque in Regent's Park, London, they would often slip in and out of the masjids of the predominant heritage communities barely noticed. There were Sierra Leoneans, Gambians, Nigerians, Ugandans Sudanese, Somalis and Swahilis among the Muslims of the heritage African communities. Africans did also blend into the more numerous Caribbean population, sharing the common experiences of racism at the hands of the host society, and of anti-Blackness from the dominant Muslim community - to announce oneself as a Muslim, on top of everything else, was to add to pre-existing problems of underemployment and social exclusion.

The African Caribbean converts were different, however. Brash, flamboyant and fired with

the zeal of the convert, they were to deliver salaams at the limit of the decibel level from the opposite side of the street, conspicuously kitted out in thobes, tea towels and skullcaps. Others sometimes emulated the Pakistani community by wearing the trademark *shalwar kameez*, which they no doubt adopted while visiting the Tablighi masjid in Dewsbury (Yorkshire) or the Markazi Mosque, which at the time was located on Christian Street, off Commercial Way in East London, the heart of the Bangladeshi community.

Until the establishment of the ICM in Brixton, the Caribbean Muslim community had remained largely disunited, with a tendency to assimilate into heritage communities wherever possible, in particular with the Moroccan community of Golborne Road, Ladbroke Grove. As numbers swelled through conversion, the ICM in Brixton attracted the attention of the first Caribbean graduates from Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, and in time the original character of the community was to change, favouring the more puritanical expression typical of Saudi Arabia.

One symbolic change as a result of this hardening of attitudes was the departure of the Nigerian Imam Saadudeen Daniju. He was a Yoruba man and his community, mostly settled in the borough of Southwark not far away, had managed the purchase of a pub which they converted into a mosque known as the Nigerian Muslim community. Many of the Yoruba formerly associated with the ICM now gravitated towards the new mosque on the Old Kent Road, where the visiting professor Dr. Daud Noibi of Ibadan University was a frequent speaker.

The Sierra Leonean community meanwhile, had bought a building on the Brixton Road, again about two bus stops distance from the ICM (which was based on Gresham Road), where Shaykh Salah was invited to lead his community; an offer he accepted, given his increasing marginalisation with the change of management at the ICM. He was followed there by the Ghanaian shaykh Faisal Boadi of Islam Channel fame shortly afterwards.

The spread of Islam among the African and Caribbean communities from the late 1990s onwards is also a story of the children of the Windrush as middle-aged parents and grandparents. Their own children recognised no place as 'back home' ; they were Londoners, Brummies and Mancunians. The children of the African and African Caribbean communities drew closer together, growing up as they did, facing the same challenges of anti-Blackness and under-class status. Forgotten were the earlier days of hostility between the African and African Caribbean communities that had characterised the 1970s. Many young Africans, whose parents like the Congolese who came from parts of the continent that were not traditionally Muslim would also gravitate towards Islam (like their Caribbean counterparts) usually under the influence of Rap and Hip Hop musical groups out of the US, many of whose headline members were Muslim.

Whereas in 1970s Black Britain a major incentive to conversion was the reclamation of racial identity, by the 1990s the emphasis had shifted. The next wave of converts were concerned with problems that were common to the mainstream metropolis - with anomie and existential angst; such as the social ills that had resulted from the inner-city gentrification that was taking

place alongside urban decay, reflecting the widening gulf, worldwide, between the rich few and the many impoverished. Muslim artistes, African American converts, from stand up comedians like Dave Chapelle to musicians like Yasin Bey were fast becoming the mouthpiece of this growing constituency and were to find the response to their call in the voice of London-based groups like Mecca2Medina.

Islam in Britain in the 1990s had begun to seem less and less the exclusive preserve of the South Asian Muslim communities. The character of Islam among the younger generation of South Asian Muslims had begun to change accordingly. This had as much to do with the interaction between the children of the newly-arrived heritage Muslim communities, mostly Arabic-speaking, from Algeria to Iraq, and the coming of age of the second generation of African Caribbeans, born Muslim in the UK. To this crucible must be factored in the changes that had started taking place in identity politics since the 1970s. During the 1970s the term ‘Black’ was a catch-all for non-white ethnic minorities, but as the respective communities settled in and planted permanent roots, each community began to assert its own distinct ethnic and religious identity.

The impact of this evolving Muslim mosaic in the western world, giving the younger generation the appearance of an ‘ethnic’ identity, was to prove attractive to the African Caribbeans who entered Islam in the 1990s. It would result in a diminution of the racialised element of the African Caribbean Islam of the seventies, and the blending in of young African Caribbeans with other Muslims to form the hyphenated identity ‘British Muslim.’



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EXCLUSION, ADAPTATION, AND THE DIGITAL CONGREGATION

BY LAMINE KONATE