

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.’



SHEIKH DANJUMA BIHARI

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EXCLUSION, ADAPTATION, AND THE DIGITAL CONGREGATION

BY LAMINE KONATE

There are approximately 1,500 mosques in Britain (Graves 2020), many converted from cinemas, warehouses, churches among other structures (Saleem 2018). The Peckham High Street Mosque and Cultural Centre is unique in that it sits in a Victorian-era commercial building; it is also unique in its location on a high street, near a bus station, and a busy commercial area surrounded by groceries, the local library, pubs, and other shops. Its positioning on the busy urban landscape reflects its importance in the social fabric of the high street; partnering with two local charities, Citizens Advice and with Pecan, and responding to difficulties local people face, regardless of their faith. Like other communities of faith that adapted activities to online spaces, they have responded to the needs of the Londoners as well as to larger challenges like Covid 19 pandemic.

Established in 2009, the Mosque serves a diverse community of congregants. It was established by and still serves a West African community who have a shared linguistic and cultural heritage. The Jula speaking congregants include people of Malian, Guinean, Ivorian, and Senegalese heritage; but the mosque serves a much wider and diverse community including north African and Asian. Lamine Konate, Deputy Imam, and Secretary General of the African Ivorian Islamic Trust, explained that its doors are open to all, and while there is a Principle Imam, sheikhs and visitors are encouraged - if not requested - including individuals of Nigerian, Afghan, Pakistani, and Moroccan heritage. Before the pandemic of 2020, its capacity was about 150 people and played an important role in creating a sense of community. The mosque hosts a number of social integration activities including children's activities, madrassah, a women's support group, cultural education, and religious learning circles. Weddings and naming ceremonies among others are part of the services offered regularly.

The mosque is connected with national, local organisations and Southwark Council. It supports the work of Pecan, the community centre on Peckham high street that provides a food bank service. The mosque is also a member of national organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain and Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). It supports the work of the local Council and has a partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

The way the congregation transitioned online seamlessly and quickly is an example of how many faith institutions and communities responded. Like other religious institutions, the mosque was deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The mosque closed its doors on March 18th 2020 following government guidelines. The mosque management decided to utilise virtual communication software and continue to offer many of its social activities.

Online communication among mosque members began well before Covid-19 pandemic and since the March 2020 lockdown, the congregation continued to reconstitute itself digitally. *Zikr* (recitation) as well as prayer was observed online; families were able to connect as they joined online activities together. Ramadan services carried on digitally as the whole community was connected and read the Quran together whilst sitting in their own homes. An average of 80 congregants signed in on Zoom. Lamine explains that the congregation had a form of online *jumua* (Friday Prayer) in which a *khutbah* (sermon) was delivered and congregants offered *zuhr* (mid-day prayer) on their own.

In addition, other activities and programs adapted to the online space. A nurse offered weekly workshops for women around health including mental health and depression. An advisory group was set up on WhatsApp that allowed congregation members to circulate advice around health. The mosque also set up a youth assembly, and during lockdown, set up events online. One example includes a seminar on Muslim youth in jail, attended by people all over UK.

A survey was carried out in the congregation, which indicated that as a result of the online activities, the Covid-19 has minimal impact on the congregants' wellbeing as they were occupied and engaged. This is particularly significant considering that one of the congregation members lost his life due to Covid-19.

Covid-19 has created a set of challenges, and exacerbated certain pre-existing ones. Lamine makes references to the issues faced by Black British youth such as isolation from the wider British community and sometimes living in one of the most deprived areas in the country. He noted that children in the Peckham High Street Mosque's congregation are no exception.

We know what's going on with youth especially when they're Black. There are a lot of problems. We had two teachers, we started a program to teach youth, especially those who are giving exams - for them to be ready. What I realised after Covid, was that Black and minority people are well behind in school. We don't want to let them down. One of the reasons is that we are French speaking - the first generation don't have experience on how to deal with homework. It's having a big impact on the children. One of the issues we are experiencing is that -we can't keep all of them away from the street because of the way they interact - family being very busy, because of low wages, long working hours, helping here and back home, it's impacting children. The lack of good jobs is impacting families and children. Most of the time they'll be staying outside, and the mosque can't take all of them on. This is the main reason we started the program for Muslim youth.

Rather than feeling like they belong, Konate explains that Black Muslims feel like they are profiled and excluded from Muslim circles. As a result of the barriers to inclusion for Black Muslims, "the lack of opportunities (for Black Muslims within the wider Muslim community) has forced most of us to have our own Islamic centres and mosques." The formation of the Peckham mosque community itself was a response to addressing these issues as well as divisions within the Muslim community.

Mosques like the Peckham High Street Mosque are thus vitally important spaces for Black Muslims. "More than a house of worship, the mosque has a critical and authoritative role in the cultural and political life of Black Muslims, with immediate social implications in the life of Black Muslim communities in Southeast London."



LAMINE KONATE

Lamine Konate is a professional accountant specialising in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) since 2010 and now runs his own accountancy practice based in South London. He is currently the Secretary General of the African Ivorian Islamic Trust and the Deputy Imam of Peckham High Street Mosque.

Lamine is also a junior policy adviser to the Ivory Coast Embassy in London for international organisations and a financial analyst at the Department of Credit Institutions and External Finance (Treasury and Public Accounting). Lamine also serves as the Vice Chair of the Southwark Muslim Forum and works with the Southwark Interfaith forum. He also participates in the Southwark Faith and Health program in the borough and the funding project for Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital charity for the local community in Southwark and Lambeth.

MORE THAN A MOSQUE: HOW AN INSTITUTION CREATES COMMUNITY COHESION

BY IBRAHIM ADEWUSI
