

# **Black Pilgrimage to Islam**

*Robert Dannin*

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**Photographs by Jolie Stahl**

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## Preface

*History is animated by a will for encounter as much as by a will for explanation.*

—Paul Ricoeur

**E**L-HAJJ WALI AKRAM sat in a swivel chair inside the tiny study attached to his old workshop. Long ago when his wife Kareema was alive and their children still lived at home, he built an addition onto the wood frame house at the corner of Union Avenue and East 136th Street in Cleveland. It was a big room, where he could tinker day and night on his inventions. There was enough space for a two-ton printing press with shelves everywhere, now littered haphazardly with tools, lead fonts, and unfinished pamphlets.

On his lap was a book, *The Masonic Ritual for Use of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons*, by A. Mizzardini. “The whole thing rested on the Masonic order! There’s no use beating around the bush, that’s how Islam came to America,” he declared and then reminisced about college in Prairie View,

Texas, where he had joined a nearby fraternal lodge long before he accepted Islam.

I interrupted to mention that many orthodox Muslims object vehemently to any mention of Freemasonry.

"There are many things about the history of Islam in America that people would not like to hear," he retorted. "The Ahmadiyyas were another example, but the truth is that their missionaries performed a great service in bringing the Quran to the United States. Anyway," he said, "you don't go out and get Islam. Islam gets you!"

The old imam's remarks pertained to the religious subcultures that preceded the introduction of Islamic orthodoxy on the mean streets of depression-era ghettos. Although his days as an active *da'i* (proselytizer) were over, Akram was offering a valuable lesson in cautioning his listener not to ignore what he learned as a young man traveling the rails and highways northward from Texas. Vernacular speech and plain writing are the best ways to make a point because they disseminate information to a wide audience without exclusivity. It is best not to begin by alienating the uninitiated, those who might lose interest upon hearing too many foreign terms or reading too many inscrutable concepts. The message or meanings, if valuable, will take care of themselves. They will grab an audience spontaneously. An author is simply delivering information and ought to do it efficiently.

Originally conceived as work in the anthropological subfield called ethnohistory, my research absorbs whatever possible from these academic styles but dispenses with formalisms in order to narrate stories of Islamic conversion as accurately as possible. The main job has been to steer these biographies toward publication without encoding them in excessive jargon. These accounts are important for the depth of the personalities they reveal and for expressing the motives and desires of individuals intent on choosing their own path toward salvation. All of them are informed by the power and poetry of a sacred book, the Holy Quran.

Today there is disturbance in all latitudes of discourse, however, so the navigator who successfully guides his or her ship needs more than a reliable compass. One needs an internal gyroscope that takes into account the direction of trade winds, the cresting and falling tides, water temperatures, the habits of sea life, cloud formations, swirling fogs, the creaking of the shipboard, the crew's mood, and even the fleeting neuralgia caused by subtle changes in atmospheric pressure. Finally, one needs the confidence that comes from seeking a truth—whether by means of faith or science, whether one believes it is directed from the heavens or is deduced from observed human experience.

Nearly everyone described in this study referred to the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, in which he reportedly advised the curious to seek knowledge "from the cradle to grave . . . all the way to China." Some then suggested that I should not pursue this work, calling it inappropriate. Others, like El-Hajj Wali Akram, encouraged me with their generous cooperation. I wrestled

with these alternatives and decided to continue on the assumption that the questions raised herein address an important challenge to those who, in the spirit of Ricoeur, wish to advance crosscultural dialogue.

From time to time, many of the individuals whose stories are represented in this book may have wondered exactly what happened to this research, some having concluded that it would never be published. Now they will have the opportunity to judge whether it was worth their participation; and their opinions, for better or worse, will be the ultimate evaluation of this work's success.

An academic book normally contains thanks to those of the scholar's mentors, colleagues, and students who have endured his or her bad temper and executed his or her orders in order to produce the work. I have no such debts here and wish only to thank a few individuals for their professional advice and friendly support. Michael Ratner provided an initial boost for the project by furnishing my wife, Jolie Stahl, and myself with his contacts in the Muslim community. In order of succession we met Sahar Abdul-Azziz, Dhoruba bin Wahad, Imam Al-Amin Latif, and Shuaib Abdur Raheem; they played key roles by helping us build a grassroots network among African-American Muslims. Utrice Leid and Andrew Cooper recognized the potential significance of this information to their readership and published early field reports in the Brooklyn weekly *City Sun*. Similarly, Noel Rubinton at *Newsday Magazine*, Francis X. Clines of the *New York Times*, Carlo Pizzati of *La Repubblica*, and Serge Halimi and Ignacio Ramonet of *Le Monde Diplomatique* reinforced the principle that an open, free press is still the best antidote to prejudice. Marc Landas serialized my prison research in his web magazine *Urban Dialogue*.

I am very grateful to Cynthia Read of Oxford University Press for her thoughtful and serious consideration of my work. Professors Barbara Metcalf, Yvonne Haddad, and Jane Smith also demonstrated kindness and patience as editors; they had confidence in the soundness of my scholarship and encouraged me to complete this book when it seemed no else would. Victoria Ebin first put me in touch with Professor Metcalf and arranged our fieldwork in Senegal. Howard Zinn generously responded to my entreaty for moral support nearly thirty years after first seeing merit in my writing. Frank Peters, Jill Cluster, and John Devine offered opportunities to present our materials at New York University; the same may be said for Andrew Apter and Robin Derby at the University of Chicago. Howard Dodson, O. R. Dathorne, and Maria Diedrich invited us to conferences at home and abroad. Mohamed Abdus-Sabur introduced me to Frank Vogel at Harvard, who in turn invited me to speak to his Harvard Law School class on Islamic jurisprudence. Ricarte Echeverria read draft versions of the manuscript and gave critical opinions from the perspective of someone who has grown up in a neighborhood similar to those depicted herein. Theo Calderara and Jessica Ryan of Oxford University Press were helpful and supportive throughout the publication process.

Hailu Paris kindly shared his experiences, his optimism, and spiritual uplift.



Trix Rosen was a great friend and avid supporter who lent Jolie her darkroom and also her expertise as a printer. Dale Hoffer transcribed all the interviews which included many difficult foreign terms. Brian Young made extraordinary photographic prints that translate the depth and tension of real events. David Pryor provided a watershed of knowledge about printing and manufacturing books.

My source of strength and guiding light in this endeavor has been my wife, Jolie Stahl, who never wavered in her commitment to completing this work although it often seemed more convenient and certainly less costly in all senses to let it go. Her confidence in my skills exceeds all visible results to date, but I hope that this publication will begin to prove her wisdom.

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# Abbreviations

AAUAA	Adenu Allahe Universal Arabic Association
AME	African Methodist Episcopal Church
AMM	American Muslim Mission
CUP	Committee for Union and Progress
DAR	Dar ul-Islam Movement
DOCS	Department of Correctional Services
FCM	First Cleveland Mosque
ICNA	Islamic Circle of North America
IMA	Islamic Mission to America
IPNA	Islamic Party of North America
IRM	Islamic Revivalist Movement
ISNA	Islamic Society of North America
MIB	Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood
MSA	Muslim Students Association
MST	Moorish Science Temple of Islam
NAIT	North American Islamic Trust
NOI	Nation of Islam
OAAU	Organization of Afro-American Unity
OAU	Organization of African Unity
TISO	The Islamic School of the Oasis
UIB	Universal Islamic Brotherhood
UISA	Uniting Islamic Society of America
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association

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# **Black Pilgrimage to Islam**

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## Introduction

*Whether in private or public, any attempt I made to explain how the Black Muslim movement came about, and how it has achieved such force, was met with a blankness that revealed the little connection that the liberals' attitudes have with their perceptions or their lives, or even their knowledge—revealed, in fact, that they could deal with the Negro as a symbol or a victim but had no sense of him as a man. —James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time**

**I**GNORANCE about African-American Muslims has robbed students of an important aspect of American history. It has also hindered a thorough understanding of the implications of slavery's nefarious legacy. At the beginning of this study in 1986, I decided to fill in the blanks by contacting African-American Muslims and recording their conversion narratives. I soon discovered that their testimonies often recapitulated the themes of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Upon reading the classics of conversion literature, I also found that their ideas about symbolic death and rebirth, heroism, sacrifice, and redemption



reiterated ideas expressed by John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Leo Tolstoy in *A Confession*, and Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. As an immensely popular work, Malcolm X's story also captured the Gestalt of earlier slave narratives—Booker T. Washington's classic *Up from Slavery* comes to mind—and quickly became a paradigm for conversion, functioning, like its predecessors, as a template on which the believer might inscribe his or her own experiences. Malcolm's story made it socially acceptable to discuss Islam and religious conversion because, as Claude Brown wrote shortly after its publication, "the Muslims were the home team. They were the people talking for everyone."<sup>1</sup>

This is an ethnography about that "home team." It summarizes original, independent ethnographic research. It is the first publication to use documentary photos, interviews, unpublished archival documents, historical research, and critical commentary to explore issues of theology, religious conversion, and social transformation as they apply to the extraordinary rise of Islam as an American religion. It emphasizes a documentary approach by focusing on contemporary religious practices, including worship, ritual feasts, rites of passage, and internal family dynamics. This book also treats important contemporary issues such as identity politics, morality, educational alternatives, and entanglements between religion and the state.

I began by asking Why would African Americans fashion themselves into a double minority by converting to Islam? Was there something about the Holy Quran or Islamic morality that attracted African Americans? What could Islamic worship accomplish that was absent from the many denominations of the Black Church? How does the highly disciplined Islamic lifestyle contrast with mainstream American values?

To answer such questions, I began to explore the varieties of Islamic sects in America and discovered that the modern practice of orthodox Islam among African Americans dates from the early decades of the twentieth century. Through oral history and archival research, I reconstructed the folkways of Islamic conversion and identified individual missionaries and religious organizations who proselytized Islam to African-American communities beginning in 1913.

In the 1960s several books focused on the separatist-nationalistic Nation of Islam.<sup>2</sup> These works displayed sound scholarship for the most part and were widely read, too, yet they were inadequate for a clear understanding of the scope and diversity of the Muslim phenomenon in America. They did nothing to rectify the mass media's already distorted image of Islam, which was often based on a hagiography of Elijah Muhammad. They ended up portraying a single, notorious example as representative of the entire religious movement. Rather than focus on the cultlike Nation of Islam, its racist discourse, and its conspicuous personalities, this book intends to avoid the mistakes of those authors and their epigones by looking at the religious and historical aspects of normative Islamic worship. Thus, the photos and text of this book signify the first interpretive ethnology of orthodox Islamic worship among African Americans.

As author and photographer, man and woman, we established contacts with orthodox Muslims in the New York area by frequenting several storefront mosques, learning the history of these institutions, and presenting a case for research and study. Some of our approaches were at first rebuffed. However, we eventually persuaded several key Muslim leaders of the merits to a book that would educate the public about Islam and its American-born practitioners.

Almost immediately, photography became a controversial issue. The privilege to photograph Muslim persons and their community activities was not obtained easily. It was first necessary to convince our subjects that the materials resulting from this study would be used responsibly and exclusively as educational tools. We gradually became familiar personalities in several neighborhood communities, acquired friends, and built confidence. By working with imams or the religious leaders and ordinary worshipers, both male and female, we constructed a network to various centers of Muslim worship across the country. We continued to focus on New York but also went to Atlanta, Winston-Salem, Detroit, Toronto, Cleveland, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles, frequently coordinating travel plans to coincide with the two most important Muslim holidays, connected to Ramadan and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. We also attended weekly prayer services in each city.

The study progressed from public rituals and events to family and individual profiles, where it became possible eventually to explore sensitive issues in depth. In Cleveland, we encountered El-Hajj Wali Akram at the celebration of his eighty-sixth birthday surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. An accomplished inventor with several important patents to his credit, Akram was born on a farm in East Texas and converted to Islam in St. Louis in 1925. He founded the First Cleveland Mosque in 1932, which is now the oldest continuously running Muslim institution in America. The First Cleveland Mosque presented an opportunity for an intensive study of extended family relationships on a daily basis. It resulted in a rich pastiche of images, narratives, and documents showing the history and sociology of four generations of African-American Muslims.

Later, we encountered a second Muslim community in Cleveland, the Universal Islamic Brotherhood. In contrast with the members of the First Cleveland mosque, this community represents first-generation converts who are working to build an ideal society governed by Islamic law. We were also the first outsiders to study Jabul Arabiyya, a Muslim village near Buffalo, New York, founded by four steel workers who converted to Islam during the Great Depression.

This book strives to convey individuals' spiritual orientation and the search for truth through personal transformation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the research concerning the role of Islam in prison. The documentation of Muslim communal worship in New York's maximum security jails is supplemented with personal narratives by Muslim inmates. These images and words are testimony to the powerful attraction of Islam for individuals in desperate situations—to how it structures broken lives and furnishes an alternative vision of the world.

Another part of our odyssey concerns Islam and the African diaspora. In West Africa, we visited Medina Kaolack, holy city of the four-million-strong Tijaniyya Muslim brotherhood, which claims members in over twenty-five countries. We traveled there to focus on the lives of a handful of resident American converts. From young boys through teens to some adults, African-American Muslims gravitate to countries like Senegal to become proficient at Quranic recitation and Islamic jurisprudence. In their peregrinations to Africa and beyond, Muslim converts seek to reconnect with a heritage of Afro-Islamic identity that was broken by the Atlantic slave trade.

Within this work, we sought to portray ethnographic reality without sacrificing biographical details that will draw readers to formulate their own critical views of the material. As a publication for general readers, scholars, libraries, and religious professionals, this book seeks crosscultural understanding. It is an effort to give image and voice to the thousands of African Americans who see themselves as returning to an old tradition from which they were violently wrenched.

The principal means for achieving this transformation is that of oral narrative. Narrative has long served as one of the main sources of folklore in the African-American community, important because it has provided a common vehicle for the expression of literary and artistic talents where no one is excluded by race or class. Early slave narratives served as testimonies to religious convictions and the vital traditions otherwise denied by the slaves' masters. After emancipation, folk tradition and the rural church were welded into a singular tradition. The greatest orators mesmerized congregants with their flair for mixing biblical allegory and personal experience. In the sermon could be found the elements of a literary form with its own aesthetic viewpoint, style, grammar, rhythm, images, and vocabulary.

In the depths of the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration commissioned the Federal Writer's Project to record a set of narratives by former slaves who recalled their conversions to Christianity. The motivation was to rescue these folk tales, which were about to become extinct with the death of their authors. Entitled *God Struck Me Dead*, this collection served as a model for our work in eliciting from Muslims their stories about religious transformations.

The most famous of such modern conversion narratives appears in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, where ideas about symbolic death and rebirth, heroism, sacrifice, and commitment often repeat the archetypal themes of universal folklore. Immensely successful, this work succeeded in canonizing the life of a single man, and it continues to overshadow many tales that chronicle other lives and similar transformations. This book seeks to redress this imbalance by surveying a plurality of voices who express their philosophies, narrate their adventures, and testify to their personal religious experiences. Of the various ways of doing this, I have employed several methods here. Part I is an ethnohistorical narrative that mixes primary sources, including interviews and unpublished documents, with historical research. This approach continues at the beginning

of part II in chapter 4 where the written archives of El-Hajj Wali Akram gave me the opportunity to reconstruct the early history of Islam in Cleveland. It is supplemented by individual recollections and comments. Chapter 5 is constructed similarly except that Sheik Daoud Ghani was able to provide me with a detailed narrative of the founding of the West Valley settlement in the absence of extensive documents that remain either missing or undiscovered. For chapter 6, I relied almost entirely on Shuaib Abdur Raheem's revealing personal narrative although my introduction to his story came from other eyewitness accounts, news archives, and a thorough examination of court transcripts and depositions. The sources used in chapter 7 were primarily ethnographic research and interviews in the New York State prisons supplemented by many telephone conversations with five inmates over a period of four years. I had additional access to documents generated by Muslim prisoners, their correspondence, official grievances, and also conversations with chaplains, administrators, and some of their family members. Chapter 8 gives detailed information about the family life of one particular woman, based on extensive interviews but presented in the third person. Chapter 8 is an interpretation and comparison of marriage customs where primary and textual sources serve to illustrate analytical comments. Chapter 9 combines all of the preceding approaches. Altogether these methods reflect the varying degrees of propinquity inherent in the practice of anthropology.

In most cases conversion to Islam is depicted as a return to the cosmic order. The Muslim sees this as the *sine qua non* for personal redemption, the road back to virtues obscured by the forces of subjugation and injustice. It is a theme reflected continually in the testimonies presented here. The narrators are mostly individuals who were familiar with the Bible though never quite affected by it the way they are by the Quran. Some were Christians; others were lapsed churchgoers, seekers of the truth, dabblers, or unbelievers. When conversion struck them, however, there was no room for compromise and hardly any sentiment to retain their former lives. Change was seen as totally positive.

The typical conversion narrative is a ritual act depicting an individual's pilgrimage from the chaos of unbelief (*fitna*) toward salvation. The ritual and also the narrative theme resolve the historical tensions of African-American society by concluding that liberation from racial domination and spiritual redemption are one and the same. The end goals require an indefatigable dedication to transform oneself and one's fellows. "Verily, Allah does not change the state of a people until they change themselves inwardly" (Quran 13:12) is by far the most frequently quoted scriptural passage among African-American Muslims.

From an ethnographic viewpoint, public recitation of this narrative is an essential ritual of African-American Muslim worship. The testimony of one's pilgrimage to the Divine Truth becomes a literary trope meant to circulate among friends, family, and even strangers. No details of the convert's previous life are too intimate to spare, no sins too ugly to describe, no transgressions too vile to repeat. A confession of these proportions defies censure because it shows the way forward and symbolizes the convert's ability to subdue his or her mate-

rial desire (*nafs*, in Arabic, meaning the carnal, base tendencies). This is the *jihad al-akbar* (“the greater struggle”) to which Muslims refer in describing the “fear and trembling” that overtakes the human soul as it wrestles with the satanic forces of unbelief.

In practice, requests to record these biographies generally elicited modesty. Sometimes individuals who were highly suspicious of our motives felt compelled nonetheless to take a chance that their story would circulate and become an influential device for propagating Islam among people who find themselves in similar conditions. For those who choose to speak publicly, the conversion narrative supersedes nearly every other religious attribute as a sign of Islamic authenticity. It serves as an ellipsis for the normative definition of a Muslim as one who follows the Five Pillars of Faith—profession of faith (*shahada*); daily prayer (*salat*); observance of Ramadan fasting; tithing (*zakat*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). It marks the spot, like an X, where one’s life took a momentous detour from which there is theoretically no return.

Firmly rooted in the oral tradition, the conversion narrative signifies the will, often desperate, to renegotiate one’s personal history and ethnic destiny. Ironically, it can also mean a further alienation from one’s family and friends. It complicates social relations at work, in school, or in civic affairs. But the price seems worth paying for the steady few. Their sacrifice of real ties to family recapitulates symbolically the total dehumanization that vitiated African-American life for a very long time—breakup of the family, ghettoization, crime, substance dependencies, and myriad health problems. Islamic conversion promises to resolve these problems once and for all by furnishing a new genealogy (membership in the worldwide Islamic *umma*), a new moral system, and a new code of personal and social hygiene. Henceforth the believer enters a new space-time continuum that separates believers from infidels.

Suddenly, geographical space gets reorganized according to a map where Mecca is the center for all calibrations of place. Chronologically, the believer resets his or her calendar to a reckoning of time based on a new epoch that began when the Prophet formed his community-in-exile at Medina in A.D. 622, known as year 1 of the Hegira. The Prophetic Traditions become the superstructure for a virtuous life with divine law (*sharia*) as its governing moral code. Even the human senses are purified (*wudzu*), leading to changes in the aesthetic appreciation of sight, sound, taste, aroma, and touch, each yielding to the primacy of the recited word of Allah in the original Arabic of the Holy Quran. Socially, the narrative rejuvenates a popular imagination in the guise of a subjectivity that is neither transcendental nor romantic yet is plainly therapeutic. In these terms, conversion relates to a psychology that owes as much to Franz Fanon as to Freud because the narrative of Islamic conversion is a ritual excoriation of the old life that purifies by exposing a person’s sins to the acid light of family and community. Its inward trajectory confronts the repressed trauma exclusive to African-American history: the very distortion of memory itself during slavery, the destruction of extended genealogy, enforced belief systems and modes of thought,

intraethnic ambivalence and conflict, misrecognition (as in the constant denial of Islam by black chroniclers), and lack of access to scripture and truth.

Historically, the conversion narratives reported herein begin at the junction of two epic tragedies of the early twentieth century, the Great Migration (1914–19) and the Great Depression (1929–45). These were periods of profound suffering for African Americans, uprooted from the land and dumped uncereemoniously into the urban miasma. Conventional religious beliefs were incapable of explaining this topsy-turvy world, where men and women died on the streets, victimized not by war or any plague indexed in the Bible but by a mysterious force called “the economy.” Is it such a wonder that spiritual inspiration would arise from these dire circumstances? Or that the working poor, excluded by racism from political power, would seek redemption in an alternative faith?

It was in this context that El-Hajj Wali Akram and Sheik Daoud Ghani sought personal redemption according to their measure of suffering, rejection, homelessness, and poverty. Each story recounts a pilgrimage motivated by the need to break with a suffocating rural tradition that retained emotional, if not material, connections to slavery. Through physical displacement and eventually religious conversion, both men severed these bonds as a way of liberating themselves from extended-family responsibilities and a life of debt in the rural South. They sealed this rupture by changing their Christian names and surnames, both sources of identification with a false ancestor—the white slave master. Thus, young Walter Gregg became Wali Akram in 1926 after hearing a Muslim missionary on a St. Louis street corner, and David Duffy became Daoud Ghani in 1932 after attending several meetings held by another Islamic missionary in downtown Buffalo. Certainly there was more than one way for an urban migrant to remake himself as a modern wage laborer, but this was perhaps the most dramatic declaration of personal independence.

In considering religious conversions, I have tried to build on the theoretical work of Melville Herskovits, Peter Worsley, and Weston LaBarre. Of the many anthropologists who have investigated this general topic, Herskovits was the first to research New World “African” culture and define the concept of syncretism as the selective fusion of disparate cultures into contemporary practices and beliefs. He postulated a heterogeneous Afro-American cultural area, whose social geography was defined by the Black Diaspora of North and South America, the Caribbean, and West Africa. Within these limits, he believed, the ethnographer could excavate cultural, social and linguistic artifacts by observing contemporary rituals, linguistic patterns, and other cultural practices.<sup>3</sup> In the resulting debate about his ideas, Herskovits questioned E. Franklin Frazier’s counter-intuitive assumption that the experiences of the Middle Passage and plantation slavery had stripped from African Americans all memories of African culture.

Farther afield but still conceptually relevant, Worsley’s work on Melanesian islanders and LaBarre’s on Native Americans complement Herskovits’s pioneering work with their documentary evidence of syncretism and the identification of revitalization movements as moments of acculturation and religious conver-

sion. By resisting the materialist temptation to ignore belief systems as merely ideological expressions, they recognized religious conversion movements as mediation between indigenous and colonial systems, more aptly described as the struggle for hegemony between local and global forces. Since the publication of Worsley's book *The Trumpet Shall Sound* and LaBarre's book *The Ghost Dance*, anthropologists have found it necessary to adopt a more dynamic approach to the analysis of religious movements. This means describing social action according to ethnographic, historical, and psychological data.

When viewed in this light, African-American revitalization movements can be seen as the manifestation of a deep commitment to encounter history and rewrite the collective African-American experience in a global context. For individuals like Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X, Islam not only was emblematic of this imperative but also provided legitimacy to myths that had circulated for years as part of the spiritualist dogma of the eighteenth-century plantation where slave-preachers creatively transformed scripture into imagined victories for the oppressed. In their quest to learn about the belief systems of their antecedents, many African Americans have embraced Islamic pedagogy as a means for self-discovery because it opens new historical vistas and uncommon trajectories. In most cases the route leads through the Arab nations, with emphasis on the history of the Muslim caliphates in Baghdad, Cairo, and Istanbul. Other routes lead through West Africa, the Maghreb, or the Sudan. There are still others that cross neither through Africa nor the Middle East, taking instead the long way around the world from the United States to points in Southeast and Southwest Asia and then into Mecca from the east.

Faced with these competing itineraries, I wanted to keep an eye fixed on Mecca as the ultimate symbol of Islam. To maintain the *dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam) as a methodological anchor, however, demanded far more than I had realized, in terms of scholarship. Indeed, religious scholarship was the source of my own terror of displacement, loss of identity, and hesitation. My ignorance of Islam and Arabic is an aspect of this work for which I offer no excuse. The limitations of my role as ethnographer were tested often and so, too, was this project's integrity as a quest for knowledge. My sincerity in seeking to understand other persons' cherished beliefs frequently came under fire, and it was never easy to control my own reactions when shunned for who I am or when asked to profess belief in another faith.

Such are the trials of contemporary anthropology, grasping for the right descriptive tools while simultaneously absorbing a new canon. This pilgrimage is an interpretive experience; it is informed by the author's own biography and characterized by the inevitable social antagonisms of gender, race, and class. (The Quran gives credence to this hermeneutic principle when declaring that humanity is divided into innumerable tribes, so that they might know each other better.) Writing about religion or culture in modern societies is an exercise that demands a constant effort to depict individual choice and belief as conse-

quences of many contradictory forces. Such variables as economic or historical antagonisms may be readily apparent to the reader, while theology or political ideology often defy simple explanations. The task is to clarify diverse theologies or ideologies and render them in contemporary language. It is neither an exercise in self-contemplation nor an opportunity for self-attainment. I have no obvious constituencies and believe that in such an endeavor one must be prepared to say precisely what no one, including oneself, wishes to hear.

**DEMOGRAPHIC NOTE: AN INFLUENCE GREATER THAN THEIR NUMBERS** Although the U.S. Census Bureau asks Americans about their race, their income, and even how many toilets there are in their homes, religion is a taboo subject for fear of entanglements between church and state. Therefore, it has been difficult to obtain real figures for religious affiliation. However, a survey characterized as “the largest and most comprehensive survey of American religions”<sup>4</sup> estimates that the largest percentage of Americans are Christians (86.5 percent, or 214 million). Jews represent 1.8 percent of the population, or 4.3 million, while Muslims are about 0.5 percent, or 1.4 million. Of Muslims, 40 percent, or 560,000, are black, representing less than 2 percent of the approximately 30 million African Americans.<sup>5</sup> A more recent survey raises the estimate to 1.6 million African-American Muslims from a total U.S. count of 4.1 million Muslims.<sup>6</sup> With less than a decade separating these two studies, the figures represent a nearly 200 percent increase in total Muslim and African-American Muslim population. More significant, it would raise the ratio of Muslims to total African Americans to nearly 5 percent. Whatever their discrepancies in methodology and reporting, the studies indicate growth in both immigration and conversion, although the higher estimate still falls below the inflated figures uncritically circulated by the mass media.

There are African-American Muslims in almost every major American city. New York is only one area that has experienced such enormous growth. There are 112 mosques in the state of New York, with 71 in the five boroughs of New York City. Chicago has at least 40 mosques. In addition, Los Angeles, Washington, Atlanta, Detroit, Cleveland, and Toledo are cities where one might expect to see 10,000 Muslims celebrating the ‘Id al-Fitr communally. In total there are nearly 1,200 mosques nationwide.

The South-Central area of Los Angeles, scene of the 1992 uprising in reaction to the injustice at the Rodney King trial, counts dozens of small storefront mosques of various affiliations and beliefs. There was even a Shiite mosque, al-Rasul, whose black imam espoused jihad until he moved to Iran in 1989. Local Muslim activists proselytized among the notorious Crips and Bloods long before the riots gave further cause to the idea of unity. Their efforts are based on the belief that gangs represent a “primitive” stage of cultural nationalism whose logical culmination lies in adherence to Islam as the “true” religion for people of African descent. Because of the persistence of this minority of partisans in the



cause of Allah throughout the past decades, it is often said that every black youth grows up in proximity to some notion of Islam.

Consequently, almost 90 percent of the converts to Islam in the United States are African Americans, a trend whose meaning has not been lost to prominent Arab- or Asian-American Muslims who desire to build a political coalition with the goal of enhancing their position in American society. The alliance of the Muslim Political Action Committee (now called the American Muslim Council) with Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign was only one example of this attitude, which envisions electing a Muslim to Congress in the coming years. One of the immediate goals of this movement has been to start people thinking of America as a Judeo-Christian-Muslim society.

# I

## Tracking the Red Fez

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# 1

## Of Masons and Moors

**T**HE first task of this book is to describe what I call the unchurched culture of African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Without any written historical narrative and owing to the deliberately obscure accounts of non-Christian religious traditions among African Americans, writing this history is difficult and fraught with great potential for error. It is nonetheless essential if one is to properly understand the complex social, political, and intellectual forces contributing to the extraordinary rise of modern Islamic conversion that is the principal subject of this work. To portray this history requires an interpretative rendering of African-American civic life, religion, and folk practices. It means discussing mystical religious themes, including Sufism, gnosis, Freemasonry, hermeticism, and Egyptology. It encompasses relations between black, red, and white Americans. It also demands an understanding of the world of international

diplomacy, whose impact on race relations in America has been underestimated if ever mentioned seriously.

Finally, this work transgresses an unspoken taboo by offering evidence that the Black Church was not necessarily central to the spiritual life of all African Americans. By definition, unchurched means to be away from the influence of the institutions of Christianity, implying an existence at one remove from civil society. As it concerns one's attitude toward public life, to be unchurched is to eschew social convention, to stand apart. What is clear from my field research is that part of African-American society has always been unchurched. The unchurched person finds himself or herself to be "other than Christian" in religious matters but also opposes mass political culture. His or her persona in civil society is characterized by the rejection of all conventional sacerdotal and secular hierarchies. Part of my job here is to explain the directions taken by the unchurched in their search for meaning and inspiration.

The anthropological concept of *liminality* expresses the idea that all societies incorporate the seeds of their own denial to a greater or lesser extent. While liminal characters and their "unprincipled" behavior normally threaten the social integument, they are tolerated nonetheless and sometimes celebrated because their persistent antagonism redefines the notion of community. New forms of legitimacy and power surge forth when a community or nation recognizes beliefs and practices hitherto considered unconventional. For example, the First and Second Great Awakenings were liminal events that appeared to challenge the colonial and postcolonial order of American society. The gatherings of these movements cast their participants into an acute spiritual maelstrom from which they emerged with a radically different view of their mission in the New World. Some were converted literally overnight from obedient colonial subjects into determined agents of Manifest Destiny.

The liminality of unchurched African Americans is chronic throughout history because of slavery and brutal prejudice. The institutional mechanisms that might normally encourage the reintegration of discontents back into the society were off limits. Except perhaps for the performing arts, most life options, including the military, fine arts, and thinking professions were closed to most African Americans until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Rejected by white society and feeling isolated from their own communities, some individuals remained unchurched in the broadest sense, subscribing to political radicalism or religious cults. A few, after passing through a liminal or unchurched stage, discovered the Quran or Torah, converting to Islam or Judaism permanently. The rest were condemned to repeat the process indefinitely, cycling back and forth from conversion to liminality.

Since the end of the Civil Rights era, unchurched African Americans have been moving more rapidly toward Islam. I call this historic and spiritual transformation a Black Pilgrimage to Islam. My main challenge has been to write a narrative of this journey that describes the shared experiences, passions, and folklore of those individuals who identify themselves as Muslims.

I have conducted this research according to an inductive method taught to me by the anthropologist William Fenton, who coined the term “upstreaming” to describe his ethnohistorical approach to studying Iroquois society.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, this means taking information from the ethnographic present and applying it to the historical record. It is comparable to the use of a divining rod passed over dry land in search of subterranean water. My “divining rod” here is the sign of the red fez, a hat worn by men that is almost immediately recognizable as the symbol of the unchurched subculture.<sup>2</sup> In much the same way that many students of Afro-American Christianity have used the symbol of “the river” to draw connections between New World Baptist cults and certain riparian cults in Africa, I shall travel upstream using the fez to visit the world of the unchurched.<sup>3</sup>

## FROM PLANTATION TO LODGE

*“Dey waz bery puhticluh bout duh time dey pray and dey bery regluh bout duh hour. . . . Dey bow tuh duh sun an hab lil mat tuh kneel on. Duh beads is on a long string,” reported Katie Brown the great-great-granddaughter of the Muslim slave Bilali Muhammad when reminiscing about his religion in Georgia in the 1930s.*

Of the millions of Africans brutally enslaved and inhumanly transported to the Americas, how many were Muslims? From what part of Africa did they come? What set them apart from other enslaved Africans?<sup>4</sup> Why did they play preponderant roles in rebellions throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? How were they able to persist in their faith without written scripture? Is it possible to trace lineages from enslaved African Muslims to contemporary African-American Islam? These questions are the core of a rapidly growing corpus of research that involves the work of historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and many African-American scholars.<sup>5</sup>

The experiences of the earliest African Muslims in America and their resistance to the fate of slavery come to us through the narratives of slaves brought to North America from Sahelian Africa. Beginning in the late seventeenth century a significant number of African Muslims were introduced into the Atlantic slave trade. Estimating on the basis of their ethnic origin, approximately 15 percent of the African slaves sold in North America came from nominally Muslim tribes.<sup>6</sup> The ratio was perhaps higher in South America, where African Muslims reportedly fomented antislavery rebellions.<sup>7</sup>

Islam figured as one amid a plurality of indigenous African religions that came to be mixed with elements of the slave-owners’ Hebrew and Christian teachings.<sup>8</sup> The strength of Islam in this mix derived from the Arabic literary tradition and the Quran. Whereas animist slaves were divided by language and culture, Muslim slaves had a common, unifying scripture. Some of the men were *hafis*, having spent years under the tutelage of Quran teachers, mastering the

Arabic language and committing to memory each *sura*, or chapter, of the holy book. Violently separated from Africa, a few of these men kept their own memoirs in Arabic or continued to recite the Quran, creating for themselves a reputation for scholarship that set them apart from other slaves. The *almamis*, or “sheiks,” as they were known in the United States, sometimes were given special treatment. Fearing them as dangerous or powerful men, most planters singled them out for rough, brutal treatment. On the other hand, some masters welcomed the opportunity to exploit these slaves’ linguistic skills and forced them into positions of managerial responsibility. Muslim slaves whom the master considered closer to his own beliefs in religious matters might even be induced to convert to Christianity or Judaism.

The trail of the red fez links the slave rebellions of Latin America to the United States by the agency of Black seafarers, usually former slaves but also free men, who played an important historical role in transmitting politically subversive information among members of the African diaspora.<sup>9</sup> One of them was Prince Hall, a twenty-seven-year-old tanner from Bridgetown, Barbados, who arrived in colonial Boston in 1765, the date associated with the mass religious event known as the First Great Awakening. Hall was drawn from the docks along South Street to the revival meetings on the Boston Common, where he witnessed firsthand the feverish religious ecstasy sweeping the Bay Colony. He converted to Methodism and soon began to preach.<sup>10</sup> Five years later, when Crispus Attucks, a black man, became the first casualty of the American Revolution, Hall’s sermons took a sharp political turn. He espoused the belief that emancipation from slavery was integral to American independence. Stepping down from the pulpit to join the struggle for independence, he also petitioned John Hancock of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety, asking him to enlist the service of slaves for the revolutionary army. Although he was quickly rebuffed, Hall volunteered for the revolutionary army when Washington opened his ranks to free blacks on December 30, 1775.

Significantly, Hall was initiated into Masonry in 1775 and established a lodge for nonwhites under the aegis of an Irish lieutenant attached to a British regiment guarding Boston. He called on fellow lodge members to join the struggle for national independence, asserting that “[the slaves] cannot but express their astonishment that every principle from which America has acted, in the course of the unhappy difficulties with Great Britain, pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of the slaves.”<sup>11</sup> First renowned for preaching and then for his public stance on abolition, Prince Hall recruited many freedmen and escaped slaves into his lodge, where they pledged to cooperate with the revolutionary American state.<sup>12</sup>

Hall became first grand master of African Lodge, no. 459, officially chartered in 1784 and renamed the African Grand Lodge in 1791. It was a cornerstone for the work of abolitionism and integration throughout the former colonies; immediately after his death in 1808 it was renamed the Prince Hall

Lodge.<sup>13</sup> One can reasonably conclude that it was the first organized abolitionist movement in the United States led by a free person of African descent.

Other free men and women of African descent followed Prince Hall's example in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. They too were skilled, literate professionals, like the merchant sea captain Paul Cuffee and the astronomer Benjamin Banniker. James B. Dudley, grand master of North Carolina's Prince Hall Lodge, was a former slave who became a public school teacher in Wilmington, Delaware, and then an editor of the local black newspaper. He founded the first African-American insurance company, the People's Perpetual, and the first African-American bank, the Metropolitan Building and Loan Association. In 1818 "Sir Knight" Passey Benjamin organized the first "colored" Knights Templar under authorization from the duke of Sussex. The following year, Peter Ogden founded the Black Odd Fellows. Like Prince Hall, both Ogden and Benjamin were immigrants from the West Indies, seafarers who plied the route between the former colonies and Liverpool, England. These individuals and doubtless others formed a transatlantic network dedicated to the abolition of slavery. The official historian of the Prince Hall lodge wrote:

By occupation these brethren were all seafaring men, who had received all the degrees in Masonry, including that of Knights Templars in London and Liverpool. . . . Commanderies were rapidly organized and constituted in the United States. Warrants were issued to freedmen not withstanding slavery. Its banners were unfolded in many of the slave states prior to 1865.<sup>14</sup>

Freemasonry was thus integral to the construction of black civil society in colonial North America. In the first half of the eighteenth century, lodges were chartered in Martinique, Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, and Haiti. This movement spread to North America in the second half of the century, with lodges established in Albany, New York, and Charleston, South Carolina. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Prince Hall lodges had opened in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Providence, and New Orleans; much of the growth was owing to the "considerable immigration of West Indian colored people."<sup>15</sup>

Did the black merchant class comprise a liminal society bound by Masonic ritual and a code whose mission was the abolition of slavery? If so, the red fez survives as an artifact embracing the symbolism of that struggle.

A good lead for showing historical links between Islam and African-American Freemasonry can be found in the story of Ibrahima Abdul Rahaman, an African Muslim who suffered the misfortune of spending the last half of the eighteenth century as a slave in Natchez, Mississippi. One day, a traveling surgeon recognized him; he had doctored Ibrahima's father, a local Tukolor chieftain, after a serious hunting accident in Senegal forty years earlier. Seeing injustice in this reversal of fortune for the son who was now a slave, the physician reported his identity to a journalist. Subsequent articles in the local newspaper



created a sensation about the hidden “African prince” whom everyone seemed to know as just an old slave. The story of this “wrongful” enslavement gained wide appeal east of the Mississippi and eventually caught the attention of the Department of State, whose head, Henry Clay, then persuaded President John Quincy Adams to negotiate Ibrahima’s manumission. The planters around Natchez must have considered Ibrahima a dangerous character because his own slavemaster strenuously resisted the government’s offer. He finally agreed to liquidate the old African’s contract on the condition that he would be deported immediately!

One can imagine that something subversive about Ibrahima or his behavior had prompted the planter’s demand. Could it have been his refusal to abandon his Islamic beliefs and the threat of such an example, if widely known, to the maintenance of order among slaves?

Ironically, it was precisely his identity as a Muslim that led Clay and his president to cast Ibrahima’s manumission as a diplomatic gesture toward the North African sultanates, particularly Morocco. Unwittingly or not, Ibrahima played along with this strategy by traveling to the White House, where he expressed his gratitude by reciting and writing (in Arabic) *al-Fatihah*, the first verse of the Quran. Upon his arrival in Washington, Ibrahima became a ward of the American Colonization Society, a Methodist-dominated organization that was planning to send missionaries to Africa. Surmising that his exotic identity would lend an air of authenticity to their vision of civilizing Africa, they dressed him in silk robes and a fez before dispatching him on a promotional tour through the New England states.

In ignoring the warnings of the local planters, Clay apparently failed to appreciate the potential domestic consequences of his actions, for Ibrahima soon embarrassed his sponsors by stirring religious controversy everywhere. He relished the opportunity to question Christianity by arguing with religious leaders and insisted that Islam was the only true religion. Word of his notoriety spread, provoking local churches to retract their welcome and forcing him to lecture either outdoors, as he did in Niagara Falls, or in the Prince Hall lodges in Boston, Hartford, and Providence. Among freemen and slaves in his audiences, Ibrahima’s attitude, as well as his exotic appearance, inspired more than passive curiosity. Some began to recall their own Islamic religious backgrounds. Several publicly reclaimed their African-Muslim names, invoking the wrath of local whites, who branded them as impostors.

Ibrahima’s brief career as a public figure suggested a latent dissonance between slave beliefs and Christianity, an unchurched attitude that probably resonated forcefully within the network of Prince Hall lodges. Fortuitously chartered just before independence, the fraternal orders championed independence from not only the state but also the church. They served as mutual self-help organizations, insurance funds, and banks, thus assuring a degree of autonomy from the church that was otherwise unfeasible.

Some writers have asserted that the African-American lodges merely

imitated and emulated the white fraternal orders.<sup>16</sup> Against this opinion, an anthropologist has hypothesized that their structure and values were more emblematic of African secret societies.<sup>17</sup> The Prince Hall lodges perpetuated an irrepressible spirit of rebellion against the slave regime while simultaneously rejecting Christianity as the handmaiden of racial oppression. Such evidence furnishes a compelling reason to associate Freemasonry with unchurched religious practices and beliefs.

Ibrahima's legacy of exclusion from the church pulpit and his affirmation of African-Islamic identity was one of the first publicly documented manifestations of unchurched autonomy. Shortly before sailing for Africa in 1828, Ibrahima addressed a meeting at Boston's African Lodge. Upon his arrival, he was honored by a fraternal committee led by David Walker, the young abolitionist thinker. Escorting the old Muslim through the crowd of black New Englanders who had come to bid him farewell, Walker seemed deeply affected by the old man's resiliency after four decades in slavery. Pushed out of the church into the lodge halls, he had stimulated a collective African memory among his constituents, foreshadowing a collective space for black revolt, which found its first genuine voice in Walker's manifesto of liberation.<sup>18</sup>

Walker's abolitionist philosophy reentered the church movement by way of the developing racial consciousness of individuals like Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, and Henry McNeil Turner. Drawn from his own journeys in the West Indies and Nigeria, Delany began a debate about the ultimate destiny of African Americans that coincided with the great historical events of the century: Emancipation, Civil War, and Reconstruction. Coincidentally, Delany was also the earliest commentator on African-American Freemasonry.<sup>19</sup>

Considering the radicalization of the African-American church fathers, it is tempting to assume a significant degree of autonomy from the white Christian denominations altogether. This is a very controversial point whose examination lies beyond my scope here. However, as African-American mission work in Africa became a reality, further developments showed a will on the part of African-American clergymen to subvert church dogma, not only in its emphasis on Islam as an African religion but also in its demarcation of the African diaspora. Missionary emigrationism provided the conceptual foundation for later forms of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism.<sup>20</sup> These embryonic movements embraced the cause of Africans and New World blacks, Christians for the most part, whose nationalist and internationalist discourse found common cause in abolitionist and then anticolonialist propaganda.

The views about Islam held by Edward Wilmot Blyden contrasted sharply with the paternalism of black clergy such as Alexander Crummell and Henry McNeil Turner. In 1887 Blyden, a scholar and churchman from St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, published a treatise entitled *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*.<sup>21</sup> This collection of essays described his years of travel in Africa and the Levant on behalf of the American Colonization Society, which sought to spread Christianity by converting and then repatriating slaves to Africa. Assessing what he learned

about religion and society in West Africa, Blyden enumerated the advantages for Islam over Christianity. He wrote that Africans converted to Islam "at home and in a state of independence of the teachers who brought it to them," whereas, Christianity "came to the Negro as a slave or at least as a subject race in a foreign land."<sup>22</sup> He saw Islam as a truly multicultural religion where racial distinctions were less important than among other revealed religions. The Quran and Arabic pedagogy had promoted literacy, travel, and elements of classical philosophy and science while its laws protected African Muslims from the ravages of alcohol and embarrassing instances of self-deprecating behavior in the presence of either Arab or European colonizers. Blyden noted that Muslims did not enslave each other and that a slave became free once he converted to Islam.

Blyden's intellect exerted a strong influence on the burgeoning racial consciousness of Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois. When Blyden died in Sierra Leone, both Christians and Muslims conducted separate funeral rites for him. Although his life and work have become important symbols of Pan-Africanism, lingering questions about his personal attitudes and relationship to Islam still persist. Blyden himself equivocated, particularly in his remark that African Muslims should be logically predisposed for conversion to Christianity. From a critical perspective, it must be noted that his travel was sponsored by the Methodist Church as part of its overall missionary strategy. For a missionary to advocate anything so contrary to Christian conversion as Islam would have amounted to professional dereliction. In this regard, his idea of a separate destiny for Americans of African descent was an officially sanctioned form of political nationalism, designed to promote emigration and conversion. Over the years, most commentators have focused on his role in building Pan-Africanism to the exclusion of any serious discussion about his Islamic persona, instead portraying Islam as an irrational or immoral choice for persons of African descent.<sup>23</sup>

I refer to this tendency as the overdetermination of African-American history by the Black Church. As an implicit ideology of both church and academic scholarship, it limits intellectual expression by repressing the voice of the unchurched. Evidence of the struggle between church and unchurched ideologies is also reflected in the history of the Prince Hall Masonic lodges where Ethiopianist and Arabist proponents clashed repeatedly. Ethiopianism had roots in the missionary experience as a quasi-biblical justification for emigration. It originated in the work of Martin Delany and came to rest in Marcus Garvey's familiar scenario of a pure African nation. Though radical in style, it belonged to the Black Church and constituted a theology of redemption.<sup>24</sup> Arabism, on the other hand, was a representation of Islam constructed out of fragmentary knowledge. Like other folk traditions and vestigial religious beliefs, it was discordant to the ears of churchmen.<sup>25</sup>

**THE BLACK WORKING MAN'S LODGE** From the post-Reconstruction era until the 1920s, important developments in black social life occurred in the fra-