



## Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem by Zain Abdullah

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to review the book with the title of Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem by Zain Abdullah. Abdullah's (2010) Mec Black Mecca 'adds to the growing body of literature on Islam influenced by the post-modernists' challenges to neo-Orientalist Western representations of Islam (Al Azmeh 1993: 140). They are called for a historicized and contextualized view of Islam and Muslims, steering away from essentializing identity politics. Abdullah's (2010) thick ethnography, or as he describes it, "narrative style," presents a variety of anecdotes and experiences along gendered, class, and generational lines, with a common Muslim orientation towards environment and experiences.*

### 1. Introduction

Abdullah's (2010) 'Black Mecca' adds to a growing body of literature on Islam influenced by the post post-modernists' challenges to neo-Orientalist Western representations of Islam (Al Azmeh 1993: 140). They called for a historicised and contextualised view of Islam and Muslims, steering away from essentialising identity politics. Abdullah (2010) achieves this in his attention to space and partiality of identities for West African Muslims in Harlem. Islam, Abdullah (2010) argues, makes sense of trying situations, finding hope beyond mere survival (240). For West African immigrants in Harlem, Islam structures their cultural, social and material experiences navigating a new city. Abdullah's (2010) thick ethnography, or as he describes it, "narrative style," presents a variety of anecdotes and experiences along gendered, class, and generational lines, with a common Muslim orientation towards environment and experiences (12). To contextualise Muslim practices and worldviews, Abdullah asks how Harlem's cultural environment informs immigrants' experiences, through the struggle of navigating new and less than friendly spaces, as much as their own cultural and religious backgrounds constitute the space and time they inhabit (9). While Abdullah admits he has no intention "to write a book about Islam or Muslims per se," his refusal to make any conclusive comments on Islam nods to the contextual push against homogenising Islam. Rather, in the spirit of Varisco (2005) his ethnography concerns more

observing Muslims than Islam and observing rather than abstracting to theoretical or conceptual conclusions.

## 2. Discussion

The title 'Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem' indicates the thematic centrality of space in Abdullah's ethnography. It is evoked twofold, in metaphorical representations of space and the mutually constitutive relationships of immigrants in space-time. 'Black Mecca' serves as a metaphor for the space that Abdullah is interested in, connoting the religious and racial or ethnic semiotics that make sense of this cultural landscape. Metaphors and symbols of space are useful for Abdullah (2010) to understand different worldviews that integrate the sacred and the everyday (108). Doing so makes visible the cultural and historical situations that Muslims engage in. Contextualising Islam within these relationships is crucial to deconstructing a monolithic Islam, and the everyday secular religious boundaries. Space, religion and culture are inherently intertwined for Abdullah (2010) when it comes to West African Muslim immigrants; the ways that they shape spaces as much as the space-time of Harlem orders them, is critical in understanding how immigrants build their lives and meanings in Harlem (Abdullah 2010: 108). Abdullah's (2010) engagements with space are most explicitly theorised in passages such as the parade through Harlem (110). Still, space is consistently evoked through immigrant's idealisation of America (Abdullah 2010: 22), to Abdullah's (2010) walking narratives (48, 83, 173). The spatialised narration of the book is a point that has received praise in reviews (Stiles 2011: 511). Such an approach proves particularly useful when looking at diasporic (McMichael 2002) or highly mobile communities, such as Murids from Senegal (Ebin 1996). Although Abdullah (2010) does not spend much time developing his own conceptual understanding of it, the consistent references to space and other scholarly work on it highlights the significance of context as well as the active role of Muslim immigrants in making a place.

Placemaking is thus integral to Abdullah's secondary argument against assimilation theory, and for expanding strategies of integration. To view Muslim immigrants in Harlem as part of the cultural fabric, shaping the temporal and spatial world as much as it places restrictions on them, is to acknowledge their active role in constructing place. It outwardly refutes the idea of assimilation, in which immigrants take on the cultural roles assigned by a new place. Instead, as Abdullah (2010) shows, the relationship between immigrants and space-time is much more mutual than assimilationist views allow. The tension between American expectations of the 40-hour work week, and Muslim immigrants' expectations of daily prayer and Friday Jumu'ah is a prime example of the interplay of cultural and religious views on space-time (Abdullah 2010: 174). While assimilation theory has been refuted, Abdullah (2010) acknowledges, integration theory now tends to see immigrants organised into middle to lower social economic and racial groups in America (10). Beyond the argument for mutual cultural influence, he argues, integrating religion into this conceptual spatial apparatus presents a new strategy that immigrants employ to make their way in a new land (Abdullah 2010: 11). Socio-economic status is of course a concern for integration theorists. The value of religious capital, as much as cultural and material capital, Abdullah (2010) argues, need be

included in this attention to immigration and class (260). At the centre of each of Abdullah's (2010) claims, then, is Islam and religiosity. Understanding the role of Islam in immigrant's lives as they arrive and settle into the United States of America is a crucial addition to theories of integration. At the same time, it expands and complicates the web of cultural, religious and spatial relationships that Muslim immigrants are part of. Doing so situates Islam as a partial identity marker, in relation with other ways of engaging in space. Abdullah's (2010) conceptual interest in space provides a framework for his key questions of "when and where Islam mattered" and "when identities such as race matter in the scheme of everyday life" (12).

Yet, Abdullah (2010) expresses his lack of interest in a potential Anthropology of Islam, attempting to steer clear of this messy and paradoxical issue (Asad 2009: 3). At the same time, he inevitably makes an argument for the role of Islam in West African immigrants' lives in Harlem. As discussed above, he is also concerned with bringing Islam to social science immigration studies of integration. Abdullah (2010) thus inadvertently finds himself tangled in the same issues he so stringently tried to avoid. His "narrative style" and lack of jargonised theoretical sections build towards a conclusion optimistically conceptualised as hope. American capitalist labour and economic struggle is conceptualised, through Islam, as a new 'Jihad.' Racial and political discrimination too constitutes a 'Jihad' unique to this historical diaspora (Abdullah 2010: 112, 156). For some, the crushing realities of life in Harlem are understood as a "divine scheme" of Allah (Abdullah 2010: 87). Across this analysis and conclusion, Abdullah tends to uncritically use either Islam or Muslim as his subject framing. Rather than looking at the ways that people orient themselves as ethical Muslims towards the world, in their social and economic relationships as Asad (2009) might suggest (10), Abdullah (2010) jumps to how "Islam helps people make sense of [a new land]" (87). Because he constructs an argument for a worldview of hope without reflecting on his assumptions of Islam (alternatively, *islams*) or Muslim as categories, he tends to take for granted a universal overdetermined 'Islam' that clashes with some of his best contextualised and historicised ethnographic vignettes (Al-Azmah 1993: 1).

Abdullah's ethnography attempts to wrangle a broad spectrum of ideas about what it means to be a West African Muslim in Harlem, how cultural and religious senses of self pervade work, kin and community networks, language and relationships with other racial and ethnic groups. Despite the surface issues that take breadth over theoretical depth (Stiles 2011: 512), there is something to be said for the accessibility of this ethnography, and the number of issues that it raises for future work. While the suggestion of religious capital works to further Abdullah's (2010) argument for including religion in integration, the ethnography begs for more attention to class. For an argument about hope too, Abdullah (2010) tends to gloss over much of the class analysis and the struggles for survival that many immigrants find themselves in. Nonetheless, the ease at which any reader could get through it and come to an understanding of Islam as less essentialised, less all-encompassing, away from political identity politics is of great value. Furthermore, the argument to take more seriously the role of religion in immigration does not trivialise religiosity. It is unfortunate that Abdullah (2010) does not engage more critically with ideas of Islam, or outline Muslim

subject making or moralities more consistently. Ultimately, his claims for Islam and Muslims are obfuscated by a lack of conceptual and theoretical clarity. While space is an effective conceptual framework for much of his ethnography, it is still underdeveloped to be very conclusive on Muslim immigrant experience, or transposable enough to think about Muslim immigrants in different contexts. Abdullah (2010) deals well with the complex relationships of Harlem in the historical moment, where racial relationships are heightened from past movements and current gentrification. Outlining his initial questions in the prologue, Abdullah (2010) states that he “believed” that looking at when and where Islam was important would “alert me to its ‘real’ meaning” (12). He does not reflect on this much, and indeed, by the end it appears that Islam represents a unilateral force of optimism. While Abdullah (2010) demonstrates the efficacy of a spatial approach Muslim, it goes little further than this.

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