

West african muslims in the bronx

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West African Muslims in the Bronx On March 7, 2007, a chilly evening welcomed the warmth of an electric space heater. The setting was an overcrowded home in the Highbridge area of the Bronx. A total of 23 Soninke immigrants from Mali occupied the four-story house, with a staggering 17 of these being children. The two families that occupied the home were from one of the hottest regions in the world, and as the space heater warmed the first floor to a bearable degree, sleep began to take hold of the occupants. What happened next blurred their distinction between nightmare and reality. The space heater's overheated electric cord ignited a small fire. While the woman sleeping on the first floor hurriedly warned and sought help from others in the house, the fire intensified beyond their control and within minutes had engulfed the entire building. In the aftermath, a total of ten people died, with nine of these being children. Apart from 9/11, it was New York City's deadliest fire in 17 years. The families involved in the tragic fire were Soninke, an ethnic group that numbers around two million total people. They, along with other ethnic groups from Francophone West Africa, are almost exclusively Muslim. When the news of the tragic event spread, thousands of dollars were donated from individuals and businesses to assist the families involved. However, the most newsworthy responses from New Yorkers came not from removed donators, but from the West African community itself. While West African mosques and associations gathered, organized, and represented West Africans and the families involved in the fire, America received a candid look into the culture and religion of Muslim West Africans in the city. West Africans' Space in the Larger Muslim Community Hailing mainly from such countries as Mali, Guinea, Gambia,

Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, West African Muslims are just one fiber in a convoluted thread of Muslim ethnic groups in the New York City metro area. An estimated 600, 000 Muslims live in New York City itself, while an estimated 800, 000 live in the New York City metro area. Within these numbers, community estimates place around 100, 000 West African Muslims in the metro area, making them one of the more populous Muslim communities in the city. These large numbers, however, are not commensurate with the measure of influence or voice West Africans have in the overall Muslim community. There are several reasons why West Africans Muslims do not have much influence or interest in the activities of the broader Muslim populace. First, there is a Sahara desert that literally and figuratively separates West Africans from the Arab world. Ironically, while much of West Africa has adopted the culture and practice of the Arab-centric religion of Islam, Arabic people are not looked upon with favor by the average West African. This might have something to do with the fact that millions of black Africans were enslaved or sold as slaves by Arabs from 650-1900 AD! In reality, despite the illegality of the act, some Arab-background people still enslave black Africans in places like Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Needless to say, despite their adoption of Islam, West Africans are often not too fond of Arabs. Second, the ascension of fundamental Islam in the world casts a World Trade Center-sized shadow over New York City, thrusting all those with a Muslim identity or perceived similitude (just ask the turbaned Sikhs...who are not Muslim by the way) into a defensive posture. Many Muslim groups in the city used 9/11 as a platform to expound on the "truth of Islam" as a way and religion of peace. In this stance, the 9/11 terrorists

were derided as "not Muslim," and every effort was made to paint a completely different picture of Islam. Their efforts were largely successful, as the New York City public currently tends to have the perception that mainstream Islam is a peaceful religion. It is not coincidental that the public face of the Muslim New York community has made a switch over the last few years from Siraj Wahhaj, a boisterous African-American imam from Brooklyn who is an alleged co-conspirator in the 1993 bombing plot of the World Trade Center, to Shamsi Ali, who is a very mild and moderate Indonesian imam that encourages religious dialogue. Apart from the just stated offensive approach to defending Muslim identity in light of 9/11, some Muslim groups have tended towards reticence and/or disassociation from other Muslim groups. This stance, of course, draws little attention from the public, and frees up Muslim groups to tend to their own community. West African mosques are inclined towards this approach. They are almost exclusively interested in their own activities and community, and are consequently not as involved in the cooperative activities of the broader Muslim population. Third, the groups that are the most influential in the larger Muslim community are primarily the ones that are most established in America, as well as those who have money or have access to money. West Africans fall short in both of these categories. A majority of West Africans Muslims in the country came to America in the 1980s and 1990s. As most of these were undocumented immigrants, only those at the front end of migration benefited from the 1986 amnesty that granted proper documentation and the ability to legally bring family to the United States. With a majority of their population facing legal obstacles, and with limited experience in America, West Africans have yet to

a garner a major role in the development of Islam in New York. Furthermore, West Africans do not have the same resources at their disposal as other groups. According to the 2006 United Nations Human Development Index, all of the West African countries with a majority Muslim population can be found in a list of the least 25 developed countries in the world, with the four least developed countries, in order, being Niger, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The establishment of extensive Islamic institutions in New York City that reach beyond their own community would seem excessive when the needs of their own community in New York and Africa seem so broad. Fourth, the focus of West African immigrants seems to be different than most other Muslim groups in regards to their affiliation and attachment to America. Almost all West Africans view America as a place to make money in order to return to West Africa to start new businesses and to provide a better standard of living for their families. Their diminutive attachment to America can be found in the fact that many men leave their wives and children in Africa while working in America. Though years may go by without seeing their family, the wives and children of many African men stay in waiting until their head of household permanently returns. On the contrary, other Muslim ethnic groups in New York City tend to bring entire families over, buy property, and set up highly structured institutions. As Mohammad-Arif rightly points out in her book, *Salaam America*, South Asian Muslims rarely return to their home country permanently due to economic, familial, psychological, and sometimes even political reasons, even though returning may have been their original intent. West Africans, on the other hand, have somewhat of a user mentality towards America. As a result, they never become too

concerned with investing themselves in American political, cultural, or even religious issues. As they do not have a long-term mentality towards the country, they have little concern with contributing to the spread of Islam in the area, or even more so, with fighting for Islamic rights or the strengthening of the Muslim voice in America. Bleeding More Muslim When pressed in asking about religious identity, it is not uncommon for a West African to proclaim, " If you prick my skin, I bleed Muslim. " However, in reality, if one were to dig deep into the skin of West African Muslims, one would not find Islam but an animistic core that entices Africans to fear, manipulate, and appease evil spirits. Islam is merely used as one component in dealing with the world of djinn (evil spirits). This religious adherence is sometimes called, " Folk Islam. " I ran across an incredible example of this in the fabled Grand Mosque of Timbuktu in Mali (yes, Timbuktu really exists). Off to the side of the large prayer room, two unmarked doors stood side-by-side. Color was the only trait that distinguished the doors from one another, as one was red and the other black. Our Tamajeq guide pointed to the doors and claimed, " The red door is for the good marabout (something like a Muslim sorcerer). You see him when you want to get help for doing good things, like getting pregnant. The other door...well, this one is for the bad marabout, who will help you inflict harm on other people. Say...if you are the first wife and the second wife is getting all the attention...you can go see the marabout behind the black door. " Even in New York City, where West Africans insist that the need of marabouts is much less because there are not as many spirits, the spirit world is still seen as a major factor in sickness, success, and wealth. Some of the West African street vendors in Harlem,

many of whom live in the Highbridge area of the Bronx, sell items of spiritual significance alongside their traditional fare of shea butter, perfume, and incense. One particular "incense" item, while sold as standard incense to African-Americans and other patrons, is sold to West African Muslims "to ward off evil spirits." In talking with the very man who sold these items, I was intrigued by his statements made about a Malian sorcerer who had just stopped by to chat and advertise his services. The West African street vendor said, "That man is not good. He claims to be Muslim, but he is not a good Muslim. NO.... practicing medicine like that? That is very bad. That is not the way of Allah." It is interesting that even though these comments were made, the street vendor himself sold an item to protect people from spirits. Perhaps the need of selling such items was felt due to the presence of West African sorcerers in New York. With the presence of sorcerers, West Africans sense that evil could be directed towards them at any time. They then feel the need to counter this act with their own protective medicine and charms/incense to ward off djinn. In talking with one Malian man about an upcoming West African parade, he balked, "You won't find me there. That's a good place to pick up a stinger." When asked to describe a stinger, he said, "You know, when the sorcerer gets you...they're going to be everywhere. NO...I don't get around that many Africans at one time." While "Folk Islam" is certainly the background of West Africans that come to New York, there is an overall consensus that djinn are less of a concern in the city compared to Africa. Resultantly, many find themselves becoming more orthodox in Islamic practice and, in effect, "bleeding more Muslim." The Rise of the Mosque. Anyone who has ever lived in another country knows the

difficulty of getting oriented, assimilated, maintaining cultural values and identity, as well as dealing with homesickness. When an African arrives in New York City, their first point of contact is with relatives, friends, or acquaintances. However, these contacts are usually very limited, and with the lack of large African cultural spaces or associations, there is usually only one place to find the sense of community that is so innate in African society and culture. This place is found in one of the fifteen-or-so West African mosques in the city. The mosque and the imam (Muslim priest) have much different roles in West Africa than they do in the lives of West African New York. In West Africa, the mosque is simply a place of worship, and the imam spends almost all of his time studying, leading prayers, and expounding on the Qur'an (Muslim holy book) and Hadith (the traditions of Mohammed). Furthermore, marabouts tend to have more religious influence in West Africa than even the imams. As society is the strongest force on community, social, and religious life, the practice of Islam can often be treated as secondary to other social and cultural factors. However, the West Africans' placement in America lands them on much different soil, in which familiar spaces of social, cultural, and political interaction have been taken away. The only institution that stands strategically placed to address the needs of the West African community is the mosque. It comes as no surprise, then, that West Africans quickly established ethnic mosques all over Harlem, Bronx, and parts of Brooklyn. On any given Friday, juma sermons can be heard in Soninke, Bambara, Jula, Maninka, Mandinka, Wolof, Hausa, and Pulaar. These mosques naturally emerged into not only religious centers, but also social, political, and commercial ones as well. Elements of West African society that

had little to do with the mosque have become merged into the function of every West African mosque in the city, increasing the importance of Islam, religious practice and attendance, and the role of the imam as well. The imam, who has been thoroughly trained in the Qur'an and Hadith, must now become familiar with local politics, law enforcement, development/health/community organizations, immigration issues, business, real estate, and might even act as a potential matchmaker for marriages! The Bronx fire illuminated the influence of the West African mosques, as well as the fluidity between existent West African mosques. In the media circus that followed the Bronx fire, it was the West African imams and mosques that played the prominent role in organizing the West African community, communicating to reporters, and collecting the abundance of funds for the affected families. While there were certainly accompanying photographs of the affected families and friends of those who died, newspaper articles also predominantly featured the imams of different West African mosques, especially as they led funeral services and met with local government leaders. What was also striking in the activities that followed the fire is the role that non-Soninke mosques and imams played in the handling of the tragedy. The mosque that was used for the funeral service was Mandinka, consisting mainly of people from the Gambia, and was not the mosque that the affected families regularly attended. Even the imams that acted as a voice for the West African community had little to do with the Soninke mosque the families normally attended. In visiting a mosque in Highbridge one Friday that is mainly Maninka from Guinea, I was surprised to see two imams there who were Jula from Cote d'Ivoire and are mainly associated with

a mosque in Harlem. From that moment on, I have noticed that West African imams regularly visit and lead activities in different West African mosques. Even though there is one mosque they are mainly associated with, there is such a sense of solidarity between different West African ethnicities and mosques, that the imams have a very fluid sense of responsibility in regards to the community they serve. It is this pervading sense of community that gives such pride to West Africans in being Muslim. Whereas their homeland consisted mainly of Muslims and solidarity with one another was an innate aspect of West African society, Islamic identity in America, as influenced by the ethnic mosque, spurs the West African into a deepening sense of community in a land otherwise characterized by individualism and fractured relationships. Furthermore, whereas biological family serves as the greatest axis of solidarity in West Africa, the tension-filled family relations experienced by West African New Yorkers with their families back home, which is caused by separation and increased monetary expectations, cause many to shift their axis of solidarity to the local Muslim community who are going through the same things. The social dynamics between New York and West Africa, in effect, almost force the West African New Yorkers into a stronger sense of Muslim identity with one another in order to retain the innate West African value of solidarity that is slipping away from them with every passing year they spend away from their families. Through it all, the ethnic mosques solidify their importance in the life of the West African community. The Rise of Islamic Education. Islam established a foothold in some West African societies up to 1, 000 years ago. For most of the millennium, Islam was the religion of the ruling class and merchants. A

famous story has been relayed throughout the years about Mansa Musa, who has the ruler of the Malian empire between 1312 and 1337. While taking the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, Mansa Musa reportedly gave out so much gold along the way, that the North African economy suffered for decades and gold prices depleted all over the world. However, the influence of Islam did not widely infiltrate the sustenance farmers of West Africa, which is the majority population, until the beginning of the 20th century. Remarkably, since that time, Islam has spread throughout the masses, and over 90% of people in most of the West African countries in discussion consider themselves to be Muslim. Despite this fact, it is rare to find a West African who regularly reads the Qur'an, or is even capable of reading their central text. As West African countries consistently have the lowest literacy rates in the world, the people are often taught what they should believe, and do not have the ability themselves to investigate and study what is said. Although many West Africans in New York are educated and literate in French, mainstream Islamic thought claims that the true Qur'an only exists in Arabic, which only deepens the existent literacy problem in reading their holy book. On the one hand, this actually increases solidarity within the different West African Muslim communities, as truth and compulsory behavior is disseminated from one source through the mosque. This creates a society in which all members learn rote doctrine and apologetics that keep everyone " on the same page. " For instance, when a West African Muslim encounters a Christian in dialogue about religion, he inevitably asks the question, " Who was the president before the current one? " When the answer of Bill Clinton is stated, he asks, " Then who came after him? " When the answer of George Bush is

stated, he then proclaims, " See! George Bush came after Bill Clinton. Bush is the president and Clinton is not. It is the same way with the prophet Mohammed coming after Jesus. Why can't you accept this?!? " On the other hand, and this is especially the case in New York, exposure to non-Muslims convicts many West African Muslims that they need to personally study and know more about their religion. When pressed, many will say that they are Muslim simply because their parents and grandparents were Muslim.

However, the need to answer questions from non-Muslims and the search for personal social and religious identity in New York draws many West African Muslims into further study of Arabic and Islam. It is not uncommon for a West African man to work 60-70 hours of week, but still find time to go to the mosque one night a week for further study of Arabic, the Qur'an, or the Hadith. Even if they personally feel too old to begin down this educational track, they view Arabic and Islamic education as a necessary means to retain religious values and cultural identity in their children. As a result, almost every West African mosque in New York has weekend and summer Arabic and Islamic classes for children. Ironically, many West African children raised in the United States do not know their parents' main African language, yet they are encouraged by them to vigorously learn Arabic and recite the Qur'an. To the best of my knowledge, there is no West African association or mosque that teaches 2nd generation children the language of their parents. One Malian man lamented to me, " We care more about our kids learning a foreign language (Arabic) than our own! What sense does that make? " He then let out a disgusted gasp, "...these people...! " The majority of West Africans in New York City have adapted to their new society by " bleeding

more Muslim, " but it has raised the question with many on whether or not they are " bleeding less African. " Bleeding Less Muslim A West African associational leader in the Highbridge area of the Bronx talked to me one day about their association. Although his ethnic group is almost 100% Muslim, he boasted that Muslims, Christians, and all sorts of people in the Bronx use their building for events. " I don't discriminate by religion, " he said, " Anyone can use our building. In fact, I have been in America a long time. I say that I am Muslim, and I am a Muslim...but only on the outside. " This man reflects the other side of West African life in New York. While most West Africans find a strengthening Islamic identity in America, there is also a significant portion of the West African population that " bleeds less Muslim" in the city. The West Africans that venture into America, by nature, are more entrepreneurial, risk-taking, and free-thinking than their average compatriots back home. In West Africa, there is nothing more valuable than one's right standing before the group. As a result, the worst thing an African can do is shame that same group. Those people who tend to think or act differently are reinforced through shame and persecution to return to cultural norms. For this reason, West African culture as a whole, including such cultural blemishes as female circumcision, are inherently arduous to change. The establishment of West African life in New York City, however, creates new opportunities to expand the boundaries of the cultural norms of West African society as a whole. West African New Yorkers' physical separation from the cultural pull of West African society creates a softening of solidarity that tolerates more freedom and progressive thinking. If West African society was a peach, the West African New Yorkers find themselves on the soft and fuzzy

edge. Their propensity for entrepreneurial endeavors and occasional critical thinking lead quite a few West African New Yorkers' to rethink their views on Islam and the role it plays in their lives. For instance, one Malian man who had lived several places in America and now lived in Highbridge confided in me that, " I am not sure what the true way is. I know that it is Islam or Christianity, but I am just not sure. ...maybe you can't know. Maybe you just have to follow the way you were born into. " Another Malian man who had been in America for over 15 years stated, " All this religious stuff...It is all a show. As for me, I am not very religious. " Yet another man from Niger, who comes from a strong Muslim background, stated, " These West African Muslims. They do not know they have not always been Muslim. They don't know what happened to them to make them Muslims. They think they have always been that way. They do not even follow the right Qur'an...my ' Master Teacher' has taught me all these things. " In the case of this last man, he had left Islam through the influence of the Nuwaubians, a predominantly African-American religious sect born out of Brooklyn by Dwight York. This West African man felt the freedom in America to leave the social security net he had in Islam in order to follow the teachings of the Nuwaubians, even though he admitted to only reading their materials and never going to any of their meetings. What is interesting is that basic beliefs that define one's right standing before the group are more likely to be challenged in New York City than back home. The exposure to people of different faiths, knowledge, and experience create a dissonance in some West Africans between their identity and truth. On the one hand, they feel they must maintain a strong Islamic identity to be West African. On the other hand, some begin to question if

Islam really is the right way, or if they are merely following their culture. The questions asked suggest a stirring of West African cultural norms and the experimental phase of how things could possibly change. West African women, for instance, find America a place to flex new freedom, and openly challenge the traditional man's role in the family and society. As a result, I have often heard West African men talk about the problems this causes, and wish their wives to stay in West Africa lest their marriage and culture be destroyed. It is evident, then, that cultural norms are being pushed and extended in New York City and, although their numbers are in the minority, a ripple is starting that challenges current cultural and religious identity.

Conclusion Imagine growing up in a place where jobs are so scarce and money so tight, that taking the time to obtain a good education is risky business. Imagine growing up in a country whose villages and towns rarely have running water or electricity. Imagine being one of the lucky few that succeeds in education and professional qualification to obtain a university professor position, only to wait years to save up enough money to buy the family's first used car. Now imagine there is a place called New York City, where compatriots return to tell the stories of abundant job opportunities, running water, electricity, subways, buses, concrete streets, sky scrapers, and the ability to easily obtain a \$5/hour job the moment one steps off the plane. It is no wonder that West Africans have flocked to the city. The moment a West African man sets foot in America, however, an interesting dynamic takes place. They often become the "big man." The "big man" is a common African social construction in which one man usually funds 10-25 family members. This funding can be to the extent of paying for the family

members' housing, food, inventory for jobs, medical payments, etc. While some income is generated from the few family members that work in Africa, a bulk of the monetary resources comes from the "big man." Obviously, this puts incredible pressure on the West African New Yorker to "make it," and to provide for the family. When the reality sets in concerning the types of jobs available for West African immigrants (usually service jobs that demand long hours and tiring work), the luster of New York tends to wear off rather quickly. However, in return for their sacrifice, the "big men" in New York City obtain something they had never had before. They obtain an incredible amount of influence. As I talked with a Malian street vendor one day, I caught a glimpse of the extent of influence West African New Yorkers have over West African society. I had wondered in my mind how much influence could really take place in New York on West Africa when they were so distant from each other. However, on this particular day with the street vendor, he received a call from his family in Mali on his cell phone. It turns out that his wife and mother were having a minor squabble, and instead of working it out themselves, they called the street vendor in New York to figure out what to do. The influence of West African New Yorkers was clear. If minor squabbles are mediated and handled by those in New York, how much more would such vital West African societal issues be influenced by the "big men" in New York, Paris, and other cities around the world? As West African New Yorkers bleed more or less Muslim, one wonders how this will affect West African society in the years to come. To catch a glimpse of where West Africa is going in terms of religious affiliation, I think one should look no further than places like Paris and New York. The West Africans in these places hold sway

over their family's livelihood, and they are looked to for the direction and progress of their family. As West African New Yorkers certainly associate their move to America with progress, one must not ignore the fact that this progress is not merely happening with monetary and economic development. As West African New Yorkers' adjust their thoughts on religion and religious practice, one catches a glimpse of the religious West Africa of tomorrow.