

A FORGOTTEN HISTORY: BLACK MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

Nafisa Hafidh

Black Muslims have been a part of America's history since its founding, and I'm not even exaggerating. Take, for example, the most visible role of Islam found within the words and actions of Thomas Jefferson: Not only did he own a copy of a Quran, but during the campaign for religious freedom in Virginia, he demanded "recognition of the religious rights of the Mohammedan, the Jew, and the Pagan." While oftentimes the Black Muslim identity may be seen as mutually exclusive, I'm here to tell you that they're not--Black Muslims have influenced and contributed to the story of the United States. I'm reading *A Muslim American Slave - the life of Omar Ibn Said* by Ala Alrayyes, and his story sheds light on an oftentimes forgotten history. So, in honor of Black History Month, I thought it would be especially important to shed light on not only what it means to be black and Muslim, but our deep history in this country.

It's commonly thought that large waves of Muslims began to immigrate to the US during the 20th century, but in West Africa, Islam has been known since the 8th century. This is especially important to note when about 900,000 African slaves (out of 12.5 million) were taken to the Americas, tens of thousands were Muslim. Reading the autobiography of Omar evoked so much emotion, but also enabled me to see how easy I have it in terms of practicing my faith without limitations. Even during captivity and trying times, enslaved Muslims held on to their manifestations of faith--and that proved to me how much they appreciated their creator. Even with little to give and maintain, enslaved Muslims preserved and held strong to their identity. Many came from educated families and oftentimes held leadership positions, and they stuck with their customs by dressing in a particular way, practicing rituals, and even observing specific dietary laws (abstinence from pork). These qualities set them apart from others enslaved, yet held them close to their religion. His memoir opens up with Surah Al-Mulk, a chapter from the Quran which translates to "the authority" in Arabic. In this opening, he cites how all authority over man (including, in this case, slaves) lies only in the hands of Allah. These verses, as understood by experts, can be seen as a message to slave owners and the slave culture during this time. But, while most tried to maintain their Islamic identities and traditions, they also needed to adapt to their new environment to survive--this would lead to the mass conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity.

As the years went on, we started to see Christianity spread among newly freed slaves. It wasn't until the early 1900s that we began to see a revival take place in the community. As families began to move north during the Great Migration, African Americans began to embrace Islam as a response to racism, promoting the idea that Islam was and is a lost part of African heritage. Organizations like the Nation of Islam (NOI) would soon emerge, becoming an influential part of the black power movement and the broader civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. I'll never forget stumbling upon this comic strip just as Muhammed Ali once did, but, for him, it led him to leave the NOI and convert to Islam. Titled "How We Lost Our Language," this four-panel comic was published in the December 1961 issue of Muhammed Speaks, the official newspaper of the NOI.



Omar Ibn Said's story is just one written account of what life was like under enslavement as a Muslim in the United States, and, over time, the presence of this history has faded from formal education. I think Islamophobia also plays a huge role in this forgotten history. Ever since the tragedy of 9/11, US media and culture tend to work towards maintaining this idea that Muslims aren't part of American history. But--whether acknowledged by the white man or not--I'll forever repeat: Islam is far from foreign in this country, and it's essentially as American as Christianity.

Caption for the comic: In the first panel, a devout Muslim prays in Arabic when the slavemaster comes and whips the worshiper, demanding to know what he's praying. After cowering in pain, he lies and says it is a Christian prayer. The master walks away satisfied and tells the man he'll live. The comic's title is bitterly ironic.