



US Representative Keith Ellison, an African American Muslim, being sworn in on Thomas Jefferson's Qu'ran in 2007. Photo by Michaela McNichol, Library of Congress. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2uT4Zt3>

### Note on this Case Study:

Religions are embedded in culture, and are deeply impacted by questions of power. While reading this case study about Islam and life as a member of a minority religion in America, think about who is in power and who lacks power. Is someone being oppressed? Is someone acting as an oppressor? How might religious people respond differently when they are in a position of authority or in a position of oppression?

As always, when thinking about religion and power, focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

## African American Muslims

Most African Americans in the US are Christians, but some are Muslim. In fact, as of 2011, while most Muslims in the US were immigrants (63%), most native-born Muslims were African American (59%).<sup>1</sup> African American Muslims have been part of the fabric of the US from the beginning, but their position as a dual minority in both race and religion has often made them an object of discrimination.

The first Muslims in America were brought by force. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, West African Muslims were taken by white slavers who exploited increasingly unstable African Islamic empires. It has been estimated that 15-20% of enslaved Africans were Muslims, numbering tens of thousands.<sup>2</sup> Many US slave owners stripped Muslims of Islamic names, and tried to forcibly convert them to Christianity. For some slaves, Islam became a form of resistance. Many continued to practice in secret, though some Muslims were able to worship openly in isolated areas along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts.<sup>3</sup> Due to high levels of literacy in West Africa at the time, most Muslim slaves were better educated than slave owners. Most were literate, some in multiple languages. Some had studied at the great universities of West Africa in Timbuktu and Djenne and were *hafiz*—they had memorized the entire Qur'an. A few slave owners were impressed by these skills and encouraged the African Muslims to use their education. However, most slave owners tried to

suppress or hide their slaves' expansive knowledge, as it challenged the belief that Africans were inherently inferior to Europeans. The oppression of slavery took its toll on African Muslims. Though they persisted in the US until early 20<sup>th</sup> century, today, no American Muslim groups are traced back to Muslim slaves. However, their story still holds a primary place in black Islamic theology and in American culture such as in their influence on blues music.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Amaney Jamal and Liali Albana, "Demographics, Political Participation, and Representation," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Brent Turner "African Muslim Slaves and Islam in Antebellum America" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29-36.

<sup>3</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 107-9, 197-8.

After emancipation, many slaves moved from the rural American south to urban centers in the north: a period known as the Great Migration. There, in new urban communities, many African Americans were attracted to diverse strands of Islam, each of which responded to racism in unique ways. The first of these was the Moorish Science Temple of America. Created by Noble Drew Ali in 1913, Moorish Science taught that freed slaves were not African, but “Asiatic” people whose true religion was Islam. He wrote a new holy book which promoted this new identity for freed slaves, opposed white Christianity, and envisioned a new Asiatic civilization. This new scripture convinced many, and within ten years over 30,000 followers considered Ali to be a prophet. However, as both racial and religious minorities, they were often targeted for discrimination. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the FBI investigated Moorish Science, believing that their new “Asiatic” identity made them likely to support the Japanese during WWII.<sup>5</sup>

Other African Americans were attracted to Ahmadiyya Islam. The Ahmadiyya movement originated in Pakistan, where Muslims began following Ghulam Ahmad, a Muslim who claimed to receive revelation from God in 1879. Later, Ahmad claimed he was the Mahdi—an Islamic end times figure—the Christian Messiah, and an incarnation of Hindu god Krishna. To most Muslims this was heretical, even offensive. However, when Ahmadi missionary Muhammad Sadiq came to the US in 1920, he found converts in black communities who were attracted by Ahmadi messages of racial unity and resistance to Western imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

Then, in 1930, Wallace D. Fard created the Nation of Islam (NOI). Fard disappeared in 1934, but the group continued under Elijah Muhammad, who declared that Fard was the Mahdi, the Messiah, and God in the flesh. He also taught that black Muslims were the first humans, and that a mad scientist created white people, who someday will be destroyed by God. His teachings were offensive and unrecognizable to most Muslims, but to some African Americans who feared their racist neighbors, this new identity held significant appeal. The NOI was also active in the civil rights movement; Malcolm X was a member until becoming a Sunni in 1964. Still, the NOI has been controversial in both the black and Muslim communities, and the group has often split as members have rejected NOI teachings for more traditional Islamic beliefs. Like Moorish Science, the group has also been under almost constant surveillance by the FBI.<sup>7</sup>

Today, however, most 21<sup>st</sup> century black American Muslims follow more traditional Sunni branches of Islam. Many converted to Sunni Islam from the above groups, and were attracted by Islamic protests of white supremacy. These Sunnis have played major roles in recent global Islamic movements, including academic Islam, such as Amina Wadud’s groundbreaking work in Islamic feminism. Still, discrimination has continued against black Muslims who are often seen as foreigners. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, US Muslims experienced increased hostility, even though they nearly universally condemned the attacks; in 2001, hate crimes against Muslims increased 1700%. Native black Muslims didn’t escape discrimination; for example, when Keith Ellison, an African American Muslim, was elected to Congress in 2006, his political opponents labeled him a foreigner who “undermines American civilization.” Later, in 2008 and beyond, many claimed the first African American president, Barack Obama, was a foreign-born Muslim. While Obama is an American Christian, the accusations made it clear that many Americans considered black Muslims to be dangerous or untrustworthy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 90-95,101-106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-120, 131-132.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis IV, *Muslims in America*, 36-40, 64, 78-80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-43, 76, 98-100, 106-107; Jonathan Curriel, *Islam in America*, (London: IB Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 125.

## Additional Resources

### Primary Sources:

- Sunni Muslim Malcolm X, formerly a member of the Nation of Islam, speaks with the CBC (1965): <http://bit.ly/1CJgjm8>
- African American Congressman Keith Ellison responds to persistent Islamophobia in interviews in 2012: <http://bit.ly/2vEyQXp> and 2015: <http://bit.ly/2fskanC>
- “Black Heros” by African American Muslim hip-hop artist Alia Sharrief (2014): <http://bit.ly/14HYd9C>
- Interview with Olympic medalist and African American Muslim Ibtihaj Muahmmad (2017): <http://bit.ly/2viJgvO>

### Secondary Sources:

- “Islam and the United States” story from PRX: <http://bit.ly/2uWYqpi>
- Voice of America report on unique meaning of Ramadan for African American Muslims: <http://bit.ly/2vpUFcL>
- PBS video on Keith Ellison’s candidacy in 2006: <http://to.pbs.org/2vNIs1F>
- CNN video on Muslims in America with reporting on five Muslim Americans, including black Muslim Alia Sharrief: <http://cnn.it/1QLGApN>

## Discussion Questions

- How does the black Muslim experience in the US show internal diversity in Islam?
- Why do some African American Muslims look so different from traditional Sunni or Shia Muslims? Why might some Muslims be offended by these groups?
- In what ways has slavery shaped Islam among African American Muslims?
- How has the marginalized position of both African Americans and American Muslims impacted the practice of Islam in black communities in the US?
- Watch Alia Sharrief’s music video “Black Heros.” How does this single show the intersection of race and religion among African American Muslims? What about the video is unique to this context, which non-black Muslims or which non-Muslim African Americans would not share? Compare with the PRX discussion of black Muslim hip-hop from 44:15-52:07.
- Listen to the blues recording “Levee Camp Holler” recorded in the 1930s in Mississippi and a West African call to prayer in the secondary source from PRX from 8:35-11:16. Historian Sylviane Diouf has used this blues recording to show the Islamic slave roots of American blues. What musical similarities do you hear?



African American Muslim academic Amina Wadud in 2011, by Oregon State University. Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2v11DQi>