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0521600790 - Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas

Michael. A. Gomez

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Black Crescent

Beginning with Latin America in the fifteenth century, this book gives a social history of the experiences of African Muslims and their descendants throughout the Americas, including the Caribbean. It examines the record under slavery and the postslavery period into the twentieth century. The experiences vary, arguably due to some extent to the Old World context. The book also discusses Muslim revolts in Brazil, especially in 1835, by way of a nuanced analysis. The second part of the book looks at the emergence of Islam among African-descended people in the United States in the twentieth century, with successive chapters on Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X, with a view to explaining how orthodoxy arose from various unorthodox roots.

Michael A. Gomez is Professor of History at New York University. He is the author of *Pragmatism in the Age of Jihad: The Precolonial State of Bundu* (1992), *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1988), and *Reversing Sail* (Cambridge, 2005). His research, teaching interests, and publications include the African Diaspora, Islam, and West African history. He currently serves as Director of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora.

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MICHAEL A. GOMEZ

New York University



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Prologue

In 1492, Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic, and with him came Islam. Among his crews were Muslims who had been forced to profess the Christian faith; it is highly probable that Islam remained embedded in their souls. To these and others similarly stationed throughout the western hemisphere in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were added enslaved Africans, some of whom were also Muslim. Through the nineteenth century, the number of African Muslims transported to the Americas continued to grow. What follows is a history of these Muslims and their descendants in the Americas, the latter a category composed of the genealogically related as well as the African-descended who would convert to Islam.

The book is divided into two sections. The first discusses the presence of African Muslims in the Americas through periods of enslavement. It provides the context for the second part's examination of Islam's development in the United States, where, through a progression of ideas, communities transitioned from variation to orthodoxy and the adoption of the faith's five pillars. These are the formulaic profession of God's Oneness and Muhammad as His messenger; daily prayer; almsgiving; pilgrimage; and fasting Ramadan. The second part of the book also examines the embrace of the seventh-century Qur'ān and the acceptance of Muhammad as seal of the prophets. The principal argument here is that subsequent orthodoxy owes much to earlier variegation.

Put succinctly, enslaved African Muslims were distributed throughout the Americas, and they were either more numerous or more organized as a community in the Caribbean and Brazil than in what became the United States. Islam as an African importation faltered in the first two regions, going into total eclipse in many cases, whereas it emerged as an important social and political force in the United States. The experience in the Caribbean, Brazil, and Latin America can be explained by severe political repression, in combination with exclusionary practices on the part of Muslim communities and various campaigns to repatriate to West Africa. Stated differently, African Muslims in these areas were very visible and, in the case of Brazil, threatening, receiving

corresponding attention in kind from the state. In contrast, Muslim communities in the United States were comparatively quiet and compliant; their legacy survived a temporal interim until the early twentieth century, when the fortunes of Islam were revived by way of the rise of nationalist sentiment. Although by no means the only ones to do so, early leaders of Islamic-like movements forged indissoluble bonds with nationalist expressions, providing a vehicle through which certain Islamic ideas could be introduced and disseminated. Regarded as unorthodox by many, such movements reached the height of their popularity under Malcolm X, whose eventual embrace of orthodoxy in the form of Sunni Islam paved the way for many to follow. As I will explain, closure of the circle and reattachment to a form of Islam more closely resembling the religion of African forebears owes much to the pioneers of theologies at variance with the conventional.

The present discussion of Islam in the United States turns on leading figures and major movements; it is therefore far from an exhaustive study of Islam and African Americans. Research into the myriad facets and principals contributing to the complex texture of African American Muslim communities is, in many ways, in its infancy. In particular, three areas of inquiry remain for subsequent study: Islam and African American musicians, particularly jazz musicians; Islam and African Americans in the penal system; and a contextual study of Arabic manuscripts written by enslaved Muslims, which would include such materials from all over the Americas.¹

All in due season.

¹ An example of an important research project that delves into the little-known history and experience of African American Muslims is Robert Dannin's ethnography, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Its discussion of musicians and the prison experience, as well as certain pioneers in the faith, is critical; though it is largely confined to the New York area, it provides avenues of analysis that would facilitate further inquiry.