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0521840953 - 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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*The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims  
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MICHAEL A. GOMEZ

*New York University*



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521840958](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521840958)

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First published 2005

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Gomez, Michael Angelo, 1955–  
Black crescent : the experience and legacy of African Muslims in the Americas / Michael  
A. Gomez.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-84095-3 (hardcover) – ISBN 0-521-60079-0 (pbk.)

1. African Americans–History. 2. Africans–America–History. 3. Muslims–America–History.  
4. Islam–America–History. 5. Africans–America–Religion–History. 6. African Americans–  
Religion–History. 7. Muslim, Black–America–History. 8. Slavery–America–History.  
9. United States–Race relations. 10. America–Race relations. I. Title.

E185.G615 2005  
305.6'97'0899607-dc22 2004027722

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84095-8 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84095-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-60079-8 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-60079-0 paperback

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page vii
<i>Prologue</i>	ix
PART ONE	
1 <i>Ladinos, Gelofes, and Mandingas</i>	3
2 Caribbean Crescent	47
3 Brazilian Sambas	91
4 Muslims in New York	128
5 Founding Mothers and Fathers of a Different Sort: African Muslims in the Early North American South	143
Interlude: Into a Glass Darkly – Elusive Communities	185
PART TWO	
6 Breaking Away: Noble Drew Ali and the Foundations of Contemporary Islam in African America	203
7 The Nation	276
8 Malcolm	331
<i>Epilogue</i>	371
<i>Index</i>	377

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## Acknowledgments

This project began taking shape in 1994. I appreciate all those who read various versions of the manuscript, especially Claude W. Clegg III and Paul Lovejoy, and all the unnamed evaluators used by Cambridge University Press. Thanks to Lew Bateman as well – it's good to work together again.

Many contributed in one way or another over the years to help this work come to light. Among them are João Reis (who did not read any of the manuscript, but who was very helpful during my stay in Salvador), Robert Hill, Sterling Stuckey, Kathleen Phillips Lewis, Fitzroy Baptiste, Brinsley Samaroo, Amir al-Islam, and Alfred Muhammad. The chapter on Muslims in New York came out of a larger study completed for the New York African Burial Ground Project, under the direction of Michael Blakey, and I thank him for his encouragement and support. The staff at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture were also helpful with materials on Noble Drew Ali. Significant portions of Chapter 5, "Founding Mothers and Fathers of a Different Sort," originated in an article published by the *Journal of Southern History*, LX (November 1994).

My wife Mary and my daughters Sonya, Candace, and Jamila are to be commended for their patience.

As always, I thank Almighty God.

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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.<sup>1</sup>

All in due season.

<sup>1</sup> 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.