

AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIM PRESENCE FROM EARLY NEW YORK TO THE PRESENT

by Imam Al-Hajj Talib ‘Abdur-Rashid



AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS, WITH CONTINENTAL AFRICAN MUSLIMS,
IN THE ANCIENT SLAVE FORT ON GOREE ISLAND, DAKAR, SENEGAL, 2005
(5th from left center is the author, to his right is his wife, Sanaa, 4th from left center is Alasaane Diop,
formerly of the Manhattan Borough President’s office, 4th from right center is Walter Edwards,
Chairman of the Harlem Business Alliance)

Introduction

There is an increasing volume of writings detailing the history of Black people in New York City and state from the earliest times. Africans, African Americans, and other people of the African Diaspora (like Afro-Caribbeans, Latinos of African descent, etc.) are a vital and irrefutable part of the history of what has been called “the greatest city in America, and one of the major cities of the world”. Indeed, no history of the region is complete without an examination of African presence, and that of Americans of African descent, and the impact of their culture, historical contributions, and lasting influence on the shaping of life in America generally, and the Empire State in particular.

The African continent is and always has been a place of great religious and spiritual diversity, and prominent amongst its faith traditions over the past fourteen centuries has been Al-Islam . When the Prophet Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdullah (May the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him) sent the first group of Muslim refugees to Abyssinia for protection from religious persecution, the seeds of Al-Islam were planted in African soil.¹ (Ishaq by Guillaume, 1955, Haykal, 1976, Mubarakpuri, 1996,)

Ample amounts of scholarly writings and works documenting the pre-Columbian exploration of America by West African Muslims of the Mali Empire now exist. (Weiner, 1920-22, Jackson, 1970, Van Sertima, 1976, Quick, 1996) Centuries later when Africans were forcibly transplanted from the land of their origin during the Atlantic Slave Trade, they took their faith traditions with them. Thus Muslim presence was established in what eventually became known as the United States of America, and all of its major cities, including New York.

Too often though, books, films and documentaries only rarely depict Muslim presence in early America, and historical exhibitions in a vast multi-cultural city like New York, are no exception. However, modern truth telling demands that such glaring omissions cease. Shadowy black figures will continue to emerge from the past, manifesting in the present specific identities reflective of the various aspects of African culture, including religion and spirituality.

As such, it is important to understand that vast numbers, perhaps untold millions of the captive Africans forcibly transported from the African continent during slavery,

¹ Ethiopia is the oldest Christian nation on earth, but its current Muslim population is some 38-42 percent of its total populace. Further, its Falasha Jews have their own history dating back to the Prophet-King Solomon (known in Islamic tradition as Sulaiman, peace be upon upon him) and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba (referred to in the same tradition as Bilqis) and their son Menelik. Likewise, the Ethiopic Waraa Imamate of that nation, is the oldest indigenous Muslim religious order on the African continent.

were West Africans; even as others were from Central and Eastern Africa. West Africa was the home of a vast and dynamic black indigenous Muslim population, spread out amongst various African ethnic groups.

Africans Brought to the West

Examination of the historical record of Africans imported to North and South America and the Caribbean, reveals the existence of various African Muslim ethnicities such as the Mandinka, Wolof, Bambara, and Fulbe-Fulani. Names associated with other ethnicities indicating different African faith traditions may also be found, such as female captives in South Carolina named “Angola Amy” and “Igbo Clarinda”. Clarinda came from the delta of the Niger River, where the Igbo (or Ibo) people lived (Ball, 1998) Muslim identity is revealed not only in the names of certain groups who to this day are largely or entirely Muslim, but in the individual names of captive Africans enslaved on Southern plantations.

Muslim Africans in the Antebellum South

Ira Berlin documents the importing of nearly 6,000 African slaves into Louisiana, between 1719 and 1731. He further specifies their ethnic identities and origins mostly derived from Senegambia. A good portion of them were Bambara - a Malinke-speaking people from the upper reaches of the Senegal River. (Berlin,1998) The Bambara are Malian and Senegalese Muslims. Similar discoveries emerge when one studies the populations of captive Africans from throughout the South in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, etc.

For instance, male and female African Muslim names like Moosa, Wali, Amadi , Sambo or Samba , Osman (Usman), and Fatima, can be found on lists of enslaved Africans and posted notices for runaways. Sylvianne Diouf argues in her book Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas , that in Western Africa , unlike

elsewhere in the modern Diaspora, only Muslims have Muslim names. (Diouf, 1998)
This is particularly true of the Continent centuries ago, and probably still so today.

Books such as Austin's African Muslims in Antebellum America (Austin, 1997) chronicle the lives of increasingly well-known individuals spread across the country. Such sources identify the names of Muslim men such as Ayyub bin Sulaiman (Job Ben Solomon) of Senegal, held captive in Maryland (as was Kunta Kinte); his countrymen Lamine Ndiaye (called Jay) and Yarrow Mamout, held captive in South Carolina; Umar Ibn Said, held in North Carolina, Muhammad Ibn Said (called Nicholas), of the Sudan, a free man living in Massachusetts; Muhammadu Bilali of Senegal and Salih Bilali of Mali, both held captive in Georgia; and Abdur-Rahman Ibrahim, of Timbo, Guinea.

Edward Ball, a descendant of slave owners, identifies Muslim girls and women in his "family tree", as recorded in his extra-ordinary writing entitled Slaves in the Family (Ball, 1998). He notes therein that the first slaves purchased by his forebears included a girl or woman named Fatima (the name of the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him). He further lists the descendants of a female slave of Sierra Leone origin purchased by his ancestors in 1756. Her enslavers named her Priscilla, but amongst her offspring were female children with Muslim names, including "Little Binah" (undoubtedly the Muslim name Bena (pronounced "bay-na"), and a few girls named Fatima.



Captive African and African American families on Southern plantations often had Muslim women of Sene-Gambian origin as members



Umar Ibn Said was born in Futa Toro (Senegal), enslaved, and eventually lived in North Carolina

African Muslims in Early New York: The Amistad and More

Prior to the northward migration of Americans of African descent from the American South, African Muslim presence in New York can be found in the historical record. For instance, in April, 1839, Portuguese slave traders abducted a group of 49 innocent West

Africans from their homeland, and took them forcibly to Cuba. Two months later, two Spanish men named José Ruiz and Pedro Montez purchased the captives as slaves, and began to transport them to Puerto Principe, aboard the schooner ship *Amistad*.

According to the legal summary of the case (*The Amistad*, 40 U.S. 518 (1841), United States, Appellants vs. The Libellants and Claimants of the Schooner *Amistad*):

“...The Africans seized the ship, killed two of the crew, and ordered the schooner to be navigated for the coast of Africa. The remaining crew altered the course and steered for the American shore. In August of 1839, the *Amistad* was seized off Long Island, NY, by the U.S. brig *Washington*. The Spaniards were freed and the Africans were imprisoned in New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut”.

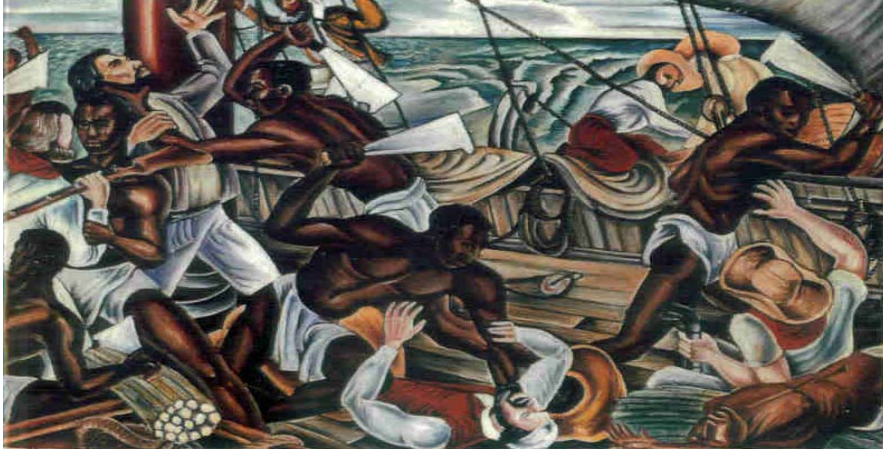
That September during a widely-publicized trial (Director Steven Spielberg even depicted it in the 1997 Hollywood film, *Amistad*), The Spaniards claimed that their “property” had names like Antonio, Simon, Martin, Manuel, Andreo, Edwards, and Celedonia.

An expert witness, a former British governmental administrator, was called to testify during the trial. Richard Robert Madden, after a visit to the Africans being held in New Haven, Connecticut, stated during sworn testimony:

“... I have examined them and observed their language, appearance and manners; and I have no doubt of their having been, very recently, brought from Africa. To one of them I spoke, and repeated a Mohammedan² form of prayer, in the Arabic language; the man immediately recognized the language, and repeated the words ‘Allāh Akbar’, or ‘God is great’. The man who was beside this Negro, I also addressed in Arabic, saying ‘salaam alaikum’, or peace be on you; he immediately, in the customary oriental salutations, replied, ‘alaikum salaam’, or peace be on you...”

Another witness was a black man named James Covey, who while being deposed, stated that he had been born in “Berong-Mendi” country in West Africa. He too had been allowed to visit the Africans, and declared that they all had Mende (Mandinka, Mandingo) names. [40 U.S. 518, 524,534,537]The Mende or Mandinka people are overwhelmingly Muslims (Kunta Kinte, Alex Haley’s Gambian ancestor, was one).

² an Orientalist word for a Muslim



Several of the Amistad warriors were Muslims

The real names of the captive Africans were revealed to be of African origin, with several Muslim names among them, including Dammah (Dramme?) , Baah, Cabbah (Kaba, the name of the Holy House in Mecca), Saah, Moorah (Moor?), Sesse (Cissé, a popular Senegalese Muslim name), Berrie, and possibly others. [40 U.S. 518, 524,534,537]

The Federal District Court ruled that the Africans were free men and women, illegally taken from their motherland, and held captive. Therefore they were not liable for their acts nor were they property. The Circuit Court upheld the District Court Decision.

During the 19th century, New York literary and societal circles entertained much discussion about the abolition of slavery. There, Mahommah Gardo Baquau, a born Muslim of dubious faith practice originally from Benin, was a well-known figure of his time. This was due mostly to the publishing of his biography in the mid-1850s. (Austin, 1997).

Henry Highland Garnett was a militant, fiery New Yorker who is considered one of the fathers of Pan-Africanism. He lived in Upstate New York, where he pastored the Liberty Street Presbyterian Church in Troy, and debated Frederick Douglass on tactics

for the liberation of Black people in America from bondage. He was unquestionably of Mandinka ancestry (Stuckey, 1987)

Depictions of African Muslims in Art and Literature

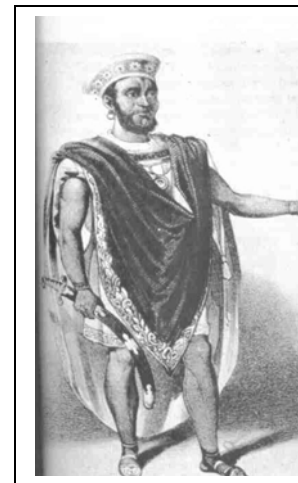
As one might expect, the presence of Muslims in Early New York emerges not only from the historical record, but from the pages of art and literature as well.

Beginning in 1833, the European theatrical world's first serious dramatic depiction of a black man, was that of Shakespeare's Othello, "the Moor of Venice". The Moors were the Black African Muslims who conquered Spain and ruled it for 800 years, ending in 1492. This was during the time of minstrel shows and what they represented in America.

The first great and internationally acclaimed interpreter of the role of Othello, was Ira Aldridge – an African American man born in New York City. Although Aldridge never performed in the city of his birth, he nonetheless enthralled audiences as a charismatic artist in England and beyond, a century before Paul Robeson's historic and then unprecedented run on New York City's Broadway, in the same role. Writings of the time claimed that Aldridge was of Senegalese ancestry

(Johnson, 1930).

Ira Aldridge (right) achieved international acclaim in the role of Shakespeare's Othello, The Moor of Venice.



The Great Migration Northward

“The early Muslim community contributed significantly to the creation of the African American identity”

-- Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*

Fareed Nu'man, former Senoir Researcher for the American Muslim Council, has identified what he calls “the sixty year gap in the history of Islam in Afro-America”. The

identified period began with the end of slavery as a sanctioned policy in the American South in 1863, and extended until the occurrence of what Professor Sulayman Nyang calls “the emergence of some form of Islam in the 1920s, among African- Americans living in the northern cities of New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Detroit” (Yunus and Siddiqui, 1998, pg. 11).

At the end of the 19th Century, the journey of African Americans northward, involved such vast numbers of people over such a short period of time, that the phenomena is known as “The Great Migration”, or “The Black Exodus”. Writer, activist and social commentator Amiri Baraka once said that this migration was “a decision, not a historical imperative”. (Grossman, 2002, page 12)

Major Northern states like Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York, were the destination of great numbers of Americans of African descent from Florida, South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia. (U.S. Dept. Of Labor , 1919)

In 1899 the great African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois wrote and published a pioneering study of the pre-World War One migration of his people from the southern to the northern United States. Entitled *The Philadelphia Negro*, it “emphasized migration as a key element in black population growth and community development.” (Trotter, 1991,pg.2)

Mary White Ovington’s early 20th Century study of black neighborhoods in the five boroughs of New York City (Ovington, 1911), showed that most of them were populated by Southerners. “The Big Apple” was the focus of southern migrations to N.Y. state, whose 1910 sources of immigrant population show the arrival of African Americans in the following numbers.

Virginia 29,157
North Carolina 10,283
South Carolina 6,698
Georgia 3792
Florida 1,257
(Osofsky, 1996, pg. 220):

By 1920, according to Darlene Clark Hine "...almost 40 percent of Afro-Americans residing in the North were concentrated in eight cities. The three eastern cities with high percentages of black citizens were New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh ..."

(Hine,1991, pg.128)

Garvey, Daoud , Abdul-Hamid, and Al-Islām

The great and honorable Marcus Garvey, who was himself the student of a Nubian Egyptian Muslim named Duse Muhammad Effendi , referred to Almighty God, Creator of the heavens and the earth during one of his famous public addresses, as "... the God of Africa, The Allah most High, Noble and Almighty" (Garvey, 1923, 1925, pg. 412)

Further, he mentioned The Prophet Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (peace be upon him) several times in his speeches, as an inspirational figure whom he considered to be a great black man. Garvey declared before an audience at Liberty Hall, in Harlem, New York on September 17, 1922,

"...everybody knows that Mohammed was a Negro...Negroes on this side of the river had accepted Christ, while on the other side, many of them had accepted Mohammed. .. He was a colored man, anyhow...".

(Minutes of U.N.I.A. Convention, August 5, 1924)

African American Sunni Muslim Pioneers

Those familiar with the great legacy of the Nation of Islam in New York City, know that it peaked between the early 1960s and the mid 1970s . Harlem produced the Nation's two most dynamic ministers – Malcolm X (later known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) and Louis Farrakhan. However, perhaps many people would be surprised to learn of the foundational work laid by African American Sunni Muslims in New York City and State.

In 1928, two years before the beginning of the Nation of Islam, The State Street Mosque (still extant, now known as Masjid Daoud) was founded in Brooklyn, New York by the late Sheikh Daoud Ahmed Faisal. To date, it is New York's oldest existing Muslim congregation and edifice.

Muhammad Al-Ahari has described this visionary leader as,

“... a devout Muslim of Caribbean and Moroccan background” who “... was born in 1891 and came to the United States as a young man. In 1920 he married his wife Khadijah. She became a dutiful aid to his Islamic work which ranged from his founding of the Islamic Propagation Center of America in 1928 at 143 State Street in Brooklyn (New York), to his establishment of the Muslim Village Madinah Al-Salaam near Fishkill, New York in 1934 (it lasted until 1942)... He was always a Muslim pioneer in all his endeavors... Sheikh Daoud founded the Islamic Mission Society of America In 1934.” (Al-Ahari, 1996,1998, pp. 1,2)

In 1949, Sheikh Daoud wrote a letter to the United Nations in the year 1949 entitled, “Islam, World Peace, and the role of delegates to the United Nations”.

Robert Dannin writes,

“... Years before Malcolm X suggested taking African-American problems to the floor of the U.N. General Assembly, Sheik Daoud successfully lobbied Arab delegates there to grant observer status to his Islamic Mission. In a statement presented at the U.N. General Assembly in October 1960, he proposed that the United Nations would realize its ideals only when ‘its entire activities (were) guided by the Laws and the Command of the Almighty God in Islam’.” (Dannin , 2006,pg. 62)



GIANTS WHO WALKED AMONGST MEN (from the left, Sufi Abdul-Hamid, The Hon. Marcus Garvey , Sheikh Daoud Ahmed Faisal, Minister Malcolm X, and later in Africa, as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz)

Sufi Abdul-Hamid

Sufi Abdul-Hamid was the first Muslim northern urban activist, to achieve success in the modern era. He was a self-determined labor movement pioneer, who organized African American workers in both Chicago and New York City, in the early to late 1930's. ('Abdur-Rashid, 1979, McKay, 1940, Greenberg,1991)

Sufi came to Harlem in 1932, as a successful activist and community organizer in Chicago. There, during a time of high unemployment of Blacks due to systematically racist hiring practices, Abdul-Hamid conceived and led a grassroots campaign and boycott that resulted in the hiring of "... 300 jobs in two months" (Greenberg, 1991, pg. 121), for African Americans, by businesses that had been exploiting the poor.

When Sufi arrived in New York City in the early 1930s, he found that American domestic workers of European descent labored for four to six dollars a day. Those of African descent were forced to do so for one dollar daily. These same workers, almost all of them women, would secure work by standing along the Grand Concourse; the longest and perhaps widest residential street in the borough of the Bronx. White American families would drive along, examine the women, and eventually pick those whom they wanted to work in their homes. The areas of the Concourse where this took place were eventually dubbed "The Bronx Slave Markets" by the black folk.

In Harlem at that time, on the famed 125th Street, African Americans with college degrees worked as elevator operators, because racism disqualified them from holding higher positions. Less educated White folks came from other parts of the city to work in the center of Harlem, even though they didn't live there, while qualified people who lived

in Harlem, couldn't work there because of racism and non-ownership of many businesses. (McKay, 1940).

Sufi used his fiery rhetoric and powerful oratorical skills (Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. claimed that Sufi's style impacted upon his own preaching) to attract a large following on Harlem streets by 1933. Speaking on the corner of W. 135th street and Seventh Avenue, he spoke out vehemently against the blatant racism and discrimination .

Sufi Abdul-Hamid rallied housewives, college students, and the Harlem masses. He organized from street corners while standing on step ladders, and is said to be the founder of that hallowed Harlem tradition. He invited Black college students and other activists to climb the ladder and speak, and they did. Eventually the tactics he had successfully used in Chicago, took root in Harlem. Black Nationalists, Church leaders, the Urban League and the Black Press, locked arms in solidarity of purpose. Harlemites picketed, boycotted, and otherwise pressured businesses like Blumstein's Department store (whose sign can still be seen hanging right across the street from the Apollo Theatre). These tactics are still used today as an organizing tool in America's inner cities.

Sufi's public uniform often consisted of high black leather boots, a military shirt and pants, a fez or turban, and on occasion, a cape. When asked about his appearance, he stated, "There is so much religion and regalia in the soul of Negroes, one can do nothing with them without some of it." ('Abdur-Rashid, 1979). He died in 1938 while piloting his own airplane. Foul play was suspected.

Present Day Community

The rich cultural legacy indicated above lies at the root of African and African American Muslim presence in New York, in the modern era. Various sources cite the ethnic breakdown of Muslims in New York City as two-thirds immigrants, and one-third indigenous (the overwhelming majority of whom are African Americans).

Over the past two decades there has been a tremendous increase in continental African Muslim presence in New York, as a continuation of African voluntary migration to the U.S. throughout the 20th Century, by students, seamen, and political refugees (Nyang, 1998). Muslim Africans have moved into various parts of the city, dramatically altering its demographics.

Currently there is a gradual but still dynamic partnering of African American (i.e. diasporan) and continental African Muslims. Beginning some 20 years ago, Harlem's two oldest Sunni Muslim mosques and congregations, The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (on West 113th Street) and Masjid Malcolm Shabazz (on West 116th Street) welcomed African Muslim immigrants to their houses of worship; incubating the growing community of their neighbors from a common Motherland.

A decade ago there were only two Sunni Muslim mosques in Harlem. There are now seven (one down from eight, because two of the congregations recently merged). Three of these Muslim houses of worship have an overwhelmingly African American congregation, with a minority of worshippers who are continental Africans. The reverse is true in the other four *masajid* (mosques) where the majority are West African Muslims from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and elsewhere. These Muslims live in the general neighborhood of the mosques.

This population growth has so impacted Harlem, that West 116th Street between Park Avenue and Frederick Douglass Blvd. is now known as “little Africa”, because of its abundance of businesses of all types; all of them owned and operated by African American and African Muslims. At the core of this bustling economic corridor is the Malcolm Shabazz Market, established by African American Muslims from the mosque of the same name, under the leadership of Imam Izak El-Pasha. The Market services the entire Harlem community. A large African Muslim community has emerged in the Bronx, in areas once heavily populated by ethnic Jews, or Spanish-speaking immigrants. Again this has led to the establishment of Muslim houses of worship and businesses. This is also evident to a lesser degree in the city’s other boroughs.



African American and continental African Muslims walk shoulder to shoulder through the streets of Harlem in 2001, honoring El-Hajj Malik/ Malcolm X

African American Muslims are diffused throughout the city, existing in every level and strata of society. They work in government, and also in public and private schools, and the Police, Fire, and Sanitation departments. They are doctors and nurses and their patients, lawyers, judges, and court clerks, teachers and students, elected officials and their assistants, social workers and their clients, entrepreneurs and

consumers, hospital and prison chaplains, convicted and incarcerated prisoners, and street criminals; alcohol and narcotic counselors, and addicts. They are well to do and homeless. They drive buses, subway trains, and taxi cabs. They are pious and impious.

These indigenous Muslims wear traditional Islamic clothes, or the latest from Armani or Liz Claiborne. They are entertainers, their managers, and athletes on every level from school aged to professional. They are everywhere – overt and covert in their appearance as Muslims. Their continental African brothers and sisters, and their children, are coming up behind African Americans as a people; learning how to live in a society quite different from their country of origin.

Unfortunately, as black people living in black and brown neighborhoods, continental African Muslims have suffered from the problems of their surrounding environments. They have been the victims of police brutality and abuse, in two of the worst such killings to ever occur in New York City – the wanton slaying of Amadou Diallo, and equally so, of Ousmane Zongo. Several months ago several African Muslim women and children died in a tragic fire in a section of the Bronx, once inhabited by other ethnic immigrant groups.

The killing of Amadou Diallo caused an outpouring of rage and sympathy amongst African Americans, Latinos, and others, that hadn't been seen in the city in decades. Similarly, the outpouring of sympathy, compassion, and charity from New Yorkers of all ethnicities and faith groups, was an inspiring milestone in the city's history of response to tragedies.

Suffice it to say that when one now walks the streets of New York City generally and Harlem in particular, both diasporan and continental African people can not only be

seen in large numbers, but their impact can be felt as black New Yorkers struggling for empowerment and upliftment.

African Muslims are perhaps the city's most recent large-scale wave of immigrants, hailing from several countries in West Africa. As they grow to know their African American Muslim neighbors, a cultural bond is forming that is apparent.

Religious leadership bodies like the Harlem Shura – a Council of Imams in “the Village of Harlem”, have a leader who is a diasporan African (this writer), and a deputy leader from the Continent (Imam Sulaimane Konate, from Cote D’voire).

Economic partnerships are forming through the vehicle of the Harlem Business Alliance, chaired by the widely-respected Walter Edwards (Abdur Rauf Nasiruddin) . In “Little Africa” on West 116th Street between Malcolm X Blvd. and Fifth Avenue, a new housing development is under construction that has an African motif exterior that one doesn't even see in many capital cities in the Motherland. It has been designed by African American architects employed by Edwards' Harlem-based company, Full Spectrum Inc.

Lastly, an increasing number of inter-cultural marriages and their resulting children, are reuniting blood ties between African people from opposite sides of the Atlantic, centuries after African families were ruptured during slavery. However, the ethnicities, names, dress, religion and culture of this vibrant, Black, non-Christian religious community, have significant roots in the city of immigrants; as we all are learning every day.

Imam Al-Hajj Talib ‘Abdur-Rashid is the spiritual leader of The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood Inc. , Amir (leader) of the Harlem Shura, and a Deputy Amir of both the Majlis Ash-Shura (Islamic Leadership Council) of NY, and the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA)

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