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“As I See It” by Hakim Abdul-Ali

Black Mecca

When anyone hears the name Harlem, he or she generally thinks of the stretch Manhattan in New York City that has for more than a hundred years been the cultural enclave of this nation's African-American most popular and well-known hub.

It's true that Harlem, USA, has indeed been the backdrop for African-Americans in the past to settle in the Big Apple, as New York City is colloquially and affectionately refer to by the masses. Even though that may have been the accepted norm over the earlier and latter parts of the last century, the "new" Harlem is demographically different.

According to the last census Harlem is now comprised of an increasingly large number of Whites and Blacks, along with other ethnicities. Added to this landscape is very interesting mix of ebony newcomers, and they are by birth, not from the continental 50 states of the United States of America. They have arrived from many African countries in the Motherland.

Dr. Zain Abdullah, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has written a book, entitled "Black Mecca-The African Muslims of Harlem," that specifically addresses the rise of this large migration of souls to the shores of America. It's published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

The book is a power ethnic story of a neglected segment of new immigrants to this country. In it Dr. Abdullah, who has a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology, takes the reader into the daily behind the scenes lifestyles of these African inhabitants of the new Harlem with a keen and scholarly approach to this deeply religious body of folks.

He shows through careful research and vast documentation how these Africans of the Islamic faith have dealt with being a double minority in this country where Black, and Muslim, are oftentimes stigmatized. The specter of being different and coming from another cultural dimension lingers throughout the struggles of the African Muslims in Harlem as mentioned in the more than three hundred page book, that was published in September, 2010.

This book really touched for me, especially since I'm a Muslim and a native of Harlem, and I was glad to see another seriously penned book of scholarship that tells the true happenings of Muslims in the modern Diaspora. This time it's about their own innate complexities in dealing with Americans and maintaining their own sense of ethnicity.

"Black Mecca" is a tour-de-force in cultural assimilation, and it details how the even longtime African-Americans have embraced these unquestioned hard working and industrious newcomers. The book makes it a point to show that the longtime Afro-American residents look upon the African Muslims as an opportunity to reclaim a greater sense of their African heritage.

In the same academic breath, Dr. Abdullah also reminds the reader that it's hasn't always the case of smooth acceptance because among some of Harlem's other residents view and look upon the Africans as scornful invaders.

Behind Dr. Abdullah's findings you see the soul of a proud and determined group of "hue-mans" forever bent on enjoying their share of the American dream of success.

It must be noted that very little scholarship has been given to acknowledging the glorious Islamic religious heritage of many of the enslaved Africans brought to these shores. Maybe, that's why as a committed researcher of race, culture and religion, I find Dr. Abdullah's book a must-read and must-have addition to anyone's library of topical and cultural wisdom.

Profusely documented with telling photos, many taken by himself, Dr. Abdullah, who is also an associate faculty member in the Department of Geography and Urban Studies at Temple University, relates how the African immigrants often take a particularly harsh view of "their" neighbors, buying into the old, worst stereotypes of and about indigenous African-Americans being lazy and incorrigible.

"Black Mecca" makes a definitive statement in telling the general public how the African Muslims from the Motherland view their own unique expression of Islam as being disregarded by most of their new neighbors in Harlem.

The United States of America has always had a large population of American-born Blacks who have accepted and embraced the orthodox traditions of Islam based upon the teachings of Holy Quran and the illustrious example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). That factor alone unites all Muslims in this country with any likeminded souls from anywhere who believe in the purity of true, spiritual Islamic religious unity.

Dr. Abdullah's skillful writing tone moves back-and-forth

in his literary griot way of describing the sagas of the African Muslims in "Black Mecca" to visually demonstrate a lucid landscape of a enterprising group of resourceful immigrant's efforts to establish a productive niche in their new and adoptive homeland.

"Black Mecca" is a timely piece of ethnographic necessity that all "hue-mans," especially the African- Americans who've always yearned for unbiased facts about "our story." Well, if you read Dr. Zain Abdullah's insightful masterpiece, you'll be one step up on your factual informational game.

But, it must be emphasized that reading is still the key to learning, and "Black Mecca" is a dynamite read in revealing what's happening in Africa, the United States of America and the rest of the world as it relates to "hue-man" immigration, religion convictions and cultural assimilation.

Remember in my aforementioned paragraph I alluded to the importance and reading. I strongly recommend the purchase of "Black Mecca" for all people of all faiths.

It's an eye opener to the "new" America as it becomes the world's salad bowl where everyone wants to be here. Reading "Black Mecca" may give you a better intellectual glimpse of an important part of urban Americana in New York City that may only be the foreshadow of what is going to happening in your city, town or village.

I salute Dr. Abdullah's effort to identify a very visible community in Harlem with poise and respect in authoring "Black Mecca." I think in years to come, this book will have paved the way for all future African ethnographical studies.

It's truly a superb and scholarly gem. I enjoyed reading, and suggest that you do also, and that's "As I See It."