

“Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem”

Reviewed by John L. Jackson, Jr.

(John L. Jackson, Jr. is the Richard Perry University Professor of Communication and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, and his review is forthcoming in the *Sociology of Religion* journal.)

Zain Abdullah’s carefully written ethnography, *Black Mecca*, tells the story of West Africans in Harlem, New York, with a particular focus on how these transmigrants describe their everyday lives in America, maintain a sense of connection to African homelands, and negotiate a complicated and cathected relationship with African Americans.

Emphasizing the ways in which vernacular theories of racial solidarity intersect with religious beliefs and practices, Abdullah argues that these Africans émigrés navigate an urban landscape of Diasporic difference that produces another variety of that oft-cited Duboisian notion of “double consciousness.” Whereas the original version of “double consciousness” offered up by Dubois pivots on the fault-line between black and white, Africana and Americana, Abdullah paints a picture of Africans and African-Americans sometimes reinforcing and sometimes refusing the would-be cultural and ethnic differences that distinguish those two communities. Whether it is African Americans characterizing West Africans as “nasty” or Africans accepting stereotypes of Blacks in America as lazy and violent, there is palpable sense, Abdullah argues, of this cross-cultural relationship being fraught with awkwardness and distrust.

At the same time, however, many Africans and African Americans push back against the too-easy reproduction of such fissures, actively lobbying for a sense of commonality and community across cultural difference—and often using race and religious affiliation as the glue that binds, potentially outweighing any of the conspicuous particularities of clothing, food, and language that produce anxieties and misunderstandings. African Americans ask African tailors to dress them up in African garments, and

Africans use familial terms (such as “cousin” and “brother”) to articulate and perform their identification with African Americans.

For the Africans who tell their stories to this interested anthropologist, stories of harrowing journeys across the Atlantic and of difficult lives upon arrival in the States, America offers financial opportunities that are not as easy to come by in places like Senegal and Cote d’Ivoire (as a function of colonialism’s legacies and globalization’s lopsided benefits). Of course, these “New World” opportunities come with a cost, and not just the pangs of longing for family and friends thousands of miles away. Regardless of one’s level of educational and occupational achievements back home, for instance, driving a taxicab represents the quintessential non-translatibility of previously enviable class (or at least status) realities onto new national soil. There is still the “American Dream” of climbing the social ladder, a dream that, to a certain degree, does become a reality for some Africans, even if that climb only entails a rung or two of economic change. Indeed, in the Age of Obama, when the son of a Kenyan migrant has become President of one of the most powerful countries in the world, belief in America’s anything-is-possible rhetoric feels all the more plausible to many.

Black Mecca compellingly describes some of the ways in which African women deploy their relative economic power in the United States to promote forms of religiosity more sensitive to their own concerns and interests. It also makes a point of showing how Africans’ experiences in harsh urban enclaves are made intelligible (and potentially more bearable) within the context of theological notions of jihad. If, as Abdullah states, USA does stand for “U Suffer Alone” to many African Muslims in America, there is clearly comfort and hope that comes with their appreciation of Allah’s mercy. Such an appreciation leads me to one of the most fascinating aspects of Abdullah’s brilliantly subtle book: its poignant demonstration of what it looks like to conduct an anthropological study of religion from the inside-out (to re-work a phrasing offered up by Annelise Riles)—that is, as a potential believer and practitioner. Marla Frederick’s rigorous work on Black female Christians in the American South stands-in as a relatively

recent example of how valuable and compelling such research can be. Frederick's own avowed Christianity doesn't compromise the significance of her research; if anything, it enlarges it, allowing for more interesting questions about the secularist presuppositions of anthropological curiosities. This is not just the erstwhile call to respect other people's belief systems, the cultural relativist gambit that serves as a cornerstone of anthropological research. It is something far more interesting: conducting research as a believer.

This is a variation on the traditional anthropological theme of the "native" researcher, a notion that has been thoroughly problematized within the discipline. Of course, Abdullah is not a native in any simple way. For instance, he wasn't born on the western coast of Africa as many of the people in his book can boast. Indeed, even when people mistake him for one of their African countrymen, his inability to speak one of their specific languages communicates his conspicuous difference. But there is something about Abdullah's consistent use of religious phrasings (invocations of Allah's mercy, wisdom, and omnipotence) to build rapport that works to create bonds of belonging that are incredibly powerful, even if they aren't always equally effective forms of ice-breaking (a point he deftly demonstrates). I found myself consistently on the hunt for clues about Abdullah's religious commitments—and wondering why I so adamantly wanted him to divulge such personal details. Instead, he mostly just plays it straight, as anthropologists are wont to do on such matters, and declares his own beliefs off-limits. Fair enough, but just the methodological implications of such an issue are ripe for thematic engagement.

As anthropologists continue to study global processes that impact the specific locales of their scholarly research, they continue to reinvent the genre and practice of ethnography. Ethnography was hardly a method cultivated for the study of transnational processes and movements like the ones that have produced the dynamic interactions that Abdullah describes. Even still, books like this one showcase ethnography's continued relevance

in a world where global phenomenon can often fool us into downplaying the significance of local specificity.

Ethnography is being re-imagined and re-designed in the 21st century, especially at a time when culture is increasingly experienced as/through electronic mediation. Abdullah does not spend a great deal of time discussing how such technological innovations inform the everyday lives of his informants, but he does a masterful job humanizing these subjects and rendering their lives and thoughts in nuanced and memorable ways.