
Even though ‘diaspora’ has become a heavily contested term, scholars consider it appropriate and applicable when investigating those groups who either freely emigrated to escape their depressing environments or those communities who were forcibly moved through economic slavery to far-flung places where they were imprisoned and enslaved. Edward Curtis IV, the author of *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora*, offered his definition by explaining that it ‘be understood as a physical scattering of human beings across time and space that has political, economic, social, cultural, psychological, religious, and emotional meanings’ (p. 8). Curtis IV noted that it was decidedly a fairly broad definition that was not only inclusive but it was one that was relatively flexible. Leaving aside Curtis IV’s pliable double-jointed definition, one cannot ignore the fact that this phenomenon has been around for generations and it has been one that has been recorded in sacred texts and narrated in popular works. Over the past few years, scholars have written numerous texts that shared the stories of various diaspora communities; these written works have, of late, been complemented by numerous documentaries that relate and recount this human phenomenon.

Curtis IV’s simple and wonderfully written text, tellingly described and captured the stories of selected African diaspora communities. Curtis IV consciously decided to choose *The Call of Bilal* as its main title, and this he explained quite convincingly in the first part of the introduction. Whilst one
finds the catchy caption quite appropriate, one wonders whether the subtitle should not have been changed to *Muslims in the African Diaspora*. The basic argument for this is based on the fact that the text’s focus was not so much on Islam as a religious tradition but more about its adherents who have meshed their religious ideals and ideas with their diverse and rich cultural practices; and as a consequence of these developments, patterns of Muslim practice, as acknowledged and illustrated by Curtis IV, differed markedly from one community to another. Put differently, these Muslims of African descent, who symbolically heard and heeded Bilâl b. Rabâh’s call, interpreted their faith’s fundamentals in such a manner that it gave them a particular understanding within their respective social contexts; and since they found themselves in these trying and desperate circumstances, they generally strove hard to maintain their Muslim identity without abandoning their faith per se. For them, like many other religious communities, the issue of Muslim identity was and remained critical. This having been the case, one should draw the reader’s attention to the fact that one of Curtis IV’s implicit objectives in writing this work was to shed light on the diverse expressions of Muslim identities among these diaspora communities. In doing so Curtis IV touched upon a variety of themes ranging from tradition and gender to culture and racism to underscore its characteristics.

Nonetheless, since Curtis IV fittingly associated them with Bilâl who hailed from Africa and who had been one of Prophet Muḥammad’s closest companions, he explored their religious practices to demonstrate to what extent their lived diaspora experiences helped shape their interpretation of Islam far beyond the Muslim heartlands from whence they started their trek. Apart from having searched for archival records for this study, Curtis IV undertook ethnographic field work and extracted some of the ideas from other scholarly outputs (pp. 6–7). Through this method of analysis, he gave a descriptive cum analytical account of a selection of these communities who reside in different parts of the world.

Once Curtis IV outlined the text’s objectives in his informative introduction, he began his investigative account by intentionally reflecting on ‘The Heirs of Bilâl in North Africa and the Middle East’ in the first chapter. He did this to not only illustrate the physical and geographical connection between these two regions but to show the socio-religious bonds that existed between them through the diaspora communities’ experiences. He traced the North African diaspora communities’ origins to earlier generations who were rudely uprooted from their environments and who were subsequently sold into slavery to North African noblemen. And he made a somewhat unsubstantiated claim when he remarked that in the process of being enslaved
they ‘were often forced by their masters to convert to Islam’ (p. 25). For these North Africans, these enslaved individuals were compelled to submissively serve in various capacities as co-opted soldiers and servants whilst others were forced to join the labour force.

Since Curtis IV was unable to offer extensive and deep insights into the presence of these communities across the two regions (i.e. North Africa and Southwest Asia), he concentrated on two representative communities. In North Africa, he discussed Tunisia’s Bori cult that was viewed by some as representations of Sufism and by others as jinn! Curtis IV, who viewed them as a religious group, argued that they were similar to East Africa’s Zar cult (pp. 26–27) that not only permitted music and dance but one that also performed healing practices. Curtis IV pointed out that some Muslim purists considered some of the group’s practices as impure expressions of Islam and hence heretical. Midway through this chapter, which he subtitled ‘Healing, Spirit Possession, and Islam in the Village’ because of these groups’ diverse cultic practices, Curtis IV mentioned briefly Morocco’s Gnawa community that shared similar characteristics with the Bori group before he moved the focus to Southwest Asia’s Jordanian Ghawarna community. This community saw themselves distinctly distant and disconnected from Africa despite Curtis IV having demonstrated the existing connections that tied their healing activities and racial cum cultural identities to Africa. One assumes that they found more affinity with their Arab rather their African roots.

From North Africa and Southwest Asia Curtis IV traveled across the Mediterranean Sea to assess the ‘African Muslims (who settled and resided) in Europe’ in the second chapter; in it, he examined the experiences of the ‘Madinga, (the) Murids, and (some of the) British Black Muslims.’ He reminded us of those who found their way into the Iberian Peninsula under Ţariq b. Ziyād (i.e. Gibraltar aka Jabal al-Tariq) whose name should be known to anyone studying North Africa and Southwestern Europe’s historical connections (p. 56). The focus was, however, not really on those early Iberian communities but on the more recent ones such as the Muridīyyah tariqa that was founded by the Senegalese Sufi Shāykh, Ahmadu Bamba.

In the first part of the chapter, Curtis IV zoomed in on the working class Portuguese speaking Madinga who trekked from West Africa’s Guinea-Bissau and settled in Portugal’s capital. He discussed, among others, the latter’s presence by reflecting upon their participation in mosques and by investigating the gender factor; and he, in particular, highlighted the gendered differences that emerged as a result of the Madinga women’s experiences at, for examples, funerals and also the conflict that arose between the Madinga women and their Indian co-religionists who had the audacity to question their
Muslimness even though this very religious group conflated their ethnic identity with their religious identity; that is, being Madinga automatically implied being Muslim (p. 61). Moving to the second part Curtis IV assessed the Muridiyyah migrants in France and Italy where they have flourished and showed how they relived Senegal in their adopted environments; in other words, reinforcing their religio-cultural and national identities through the making of items such as amulets and photos that act as reminders of their origins and by connecting them via audio streaming with Radio Lamp Fall FM. An interesting dimension of the Muridiyyah that Curtis IV mentioned in passing but did not thoroughly explore was the critical nexus between religion (i.e. Islam as expressed by this group) and development (i.e. groundnut economy) within the group’s host surroundings; he, for example, pointed out to what extent the Muridiyyah migrants funded health care institutions and basic amenities for their communities back in Senegal (p. 67).

After Curtis IV shared insights into their practices, he crossed over the English Channel to record the third case study and that is the experiences of Britain’s diverse Black Muslim community; some—such as the Somalis—who hails from parts of Africa and others who came from the Caribbean islands. He brought to the fore how these communities considered themselves as one who reside in corrupting counter-culture environments, and hence the desperate need for them to maintain their religio-cultural identities. He made reference to Poetic Pilgrimage and Fun-Da-Mental that are two popular British Muslim hip-hop groups; the members of the former are of Caribbean parentage, and those of the latter of South Asian lineage. Both composed musical items that reinforced their Muslim identities and both, as Curtis IV showed, drew their inspiration from Africa. It would have been interesting if Curtis IV had inserted, even though this was not his brief, the Muslim theologians’ responses to these entertainment groups’ musical performances.

Shifting to the third chapter Curtis IV took the reader to a part of the world where he explored the lifestyles of the ‘Siddis and Habshis in South Asia;’ in this region, he reflected on the ‘Shrines of Africa saints and Life-Cycle rituals in the Village.’ As Curtis IV traced the Siddis’ history, he observed to what degree these communities were discriminated against in South Asia (p. 92) and as he explored their practices he became overawed by the fact that numerous non-Siddi communities too visited the shrine of the African-South Asian saint commonly known as Gori pir. Curtis IV reminded us that the Siddis’ practices that sustained the shrines and venerated their Sufi shaykhs were reminiscent of the Tunisian Bori group. And he illustrated how those in the Karnataka district incorporated - alongside their Muslim beliefs—cultural practices from outside their religious tradition when they performed
their annual rituals during sacred months of Muharram, Ramadān, and Hajj. Once again one wonders what the opinions of the Muslim theologians were and are towards the Siddis’ pluralistic practices; put differently, to what extent do these theologians see their practices in line with the traditional interpretation of Islamic law and what had led them to persist in performing these when they are viewed as practices that are outside the parameters of the religious legal system that they purportedly follow?

As Curtis IV turned away from South Asia and set his sights westwards en route to Latin America, he rhetorically asked the question: ‘(is that which was taking place in the Caribbean an) Islamic Jihad or Just Revolt?’ and hence the subtitle: ‘African Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean.’ He thus first stopped over in the Caribbean islands to probe whether it was a form of ‘political Islam’ as opposed to South Asia’s ‘cultural Islam’ that unfolded. Curtis IV correctly pointed out that the simplistic explanation by Western media that ‘political Islam is associated overwhelmingly with violence and terrorism’ is an Islamophobic reading of events, and further, in that section, he also commented on the wrong assumptions made by the media as regards the concept jihād. In any case, Curtis IV first undertook an investigation of the well-known Brazilian Bahia revolt where racial discrimination was rife against the slave communities before he assessed the Caribbean rebellion that took place more than 150 years later.

Indeed the circumstances of both uprisings were markedly different but, in both instances, these were lead by Muslims; hence the concern as to whether these were motivated by a ‘political Islam’ as understood and explained in the Western media. Curtis IV essentially showed how communities of African descent (i.e. Muslims and non-Muslims in the Bahia unrest and Muslims in the Trinidad insurgency) appropriated Islam as a resource for a just cause in their political struggles. He concluded that those who partook in the Bahia uprising may not have desired to go back to Africa but that they were more interested in preserving their Muslim identity and practices that was threatened; and his evaluation of the Trinidad revolt that was led by Bilal Abdullah and his group was that they countered the corrupt political order by latching onto Islam as an appropriate vehicle to establish justice without invoking the formation of an Islamic state as understood and interpreted by the Muslim orthodoxy.

After Curtis IV examined the respective rebellions and the Muslim element that triggered both, he returned to homewards (i.e. the USA) where he is based. He internally reflected about the story of the well documented ‘African-American Muslims in the United States’ in his final chapter; a chapter that assessed how these communities have, for generations, been ‘Making
Physical and Metaphysical Homelands.’ He thus recalled the practices of Africa’s enslaved Muslims and he narrated their extraordinary struggles to return to the places of birth in Africa; thereafter, he went on to discuss in the second part of the chapter the famous Nation of Islam that was and is still led by Louis Farrakhan; the organisation’s very colourful and charismatic leader. But before rounding up his text in his concluding chapter, he made an attempt to evaluate the recent African Muslim immigrants (such as those from Sierra Leone) and the Afro-Americans’ practices by reflecting upon their meanings and functions. And Curtis rounded off his noteworthy text with a reflection of ‘Echoes of Bilal across the African Diaspora’.

In drawing this review to a close and setting aside the few critical remarks raised en passant, one concurs with the comments (on the outside cover) by Juliane Hammer that Curtis IV’s creative archival and ethnographic study brought together Islamic Studies and African (diaspora) studies to engage in an edifying and a revealing conversation. These two disciplines Curtis IV helped to enrich by identifying and unpacking various case studies; each of which he adequately analyzed with supporting evidence in a fairly reasonable and balanced manner. One is indeed convinced that Curtis IV’s intellectual interventions through this study filled the gaps of understudied cases that he mentioned. And one may conclude that the study will continue to stimulate others to further explore the same cases in order to enhance their understanding of these heterogeneous diaspora Muslim communities; communities who reside and live in countries where they publicly display their Muslim identity despite the Islamophobic media outbursts that they constantly encounter in the tragic post 9/11 era.

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