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African “Soul Brothers” in the ’Hood: Immigration, Islam, and the Black Encounter¹

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Abstract

A recent influx of 100,000 West African immigrants is creating an enclave which Harlem residents now call, “Little Africa.” Most miss the crucial role religion plays in this urban transformation, and residents pay little attention to the Muslim identity of these Black immigrants. Their African restaurants, mosques, and the annual Bamba Day parade allow them to redefine their Black, African, and Muslim identities on their own terms, marking important distinctions between them and their Black American neighbors. Most importantly, West African Muslims construct Islamic practices that help them cope with the stigma of blackness in the U.S. [Keywords: Islam; West African Muslims; US Immigration; Identity; Blackness; African Americans; Harlem, New York]

Introduction

In 1999, a media blitz covering the police killing of Amadou Diallo, an innocent victim from Guinea mistaken for a Black serial rapist, revealed he was not only one of many Black immigrants living in New York, but he was also a member of an emerging West African Islamic community. In 2003, an undercover officer wrongfully killed another African Muslim, Ousmane Zongo, an African arts restorer from Burkina Faso, deepening the City's engagement with these recent arrivals (Waldman 1999, Dewan 2003).² For the first time, New Yorkers were exposed to the Muslim practices of their West African neighbors. There was even press coverage following their slain bodies from funeral services in New York mosques to their respective countries in Africa (Sachs 1999, Boyd 1999, Garvey 2003). Because of a tendency to view immigrants in terms of their labor rather than their humanity, the media spread taught us another lesson. West African life in the US cannot be fully understood by focusing on work habits alone. Will Herberg's classic work, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, revealed how early European immigrants used religion to aid their assimilation into middle America. As Black immigrants, however, West African Muslims are already classified at the bottom of the US racial hierarchy. Yet, Judith Weisenfeld (1997:433) argues that the "African American religious experience has rendered the margin a site of power and of creativity, an activity that necessarily alters the center." In a similar way, they also challenge their peripheral status by creating religious practices they hope will shield them from a Black underclass.³

A recent influx of 100,000 West Africans into New York City, for example, is creating an enclave which Harlem residents call, "Little Africa" or "Africa Town" (Waldman 1999, Allon 1995). For the Muslims among these newcomers, their *masjids*,⁴ Islamic schools, businesses, and associations are essential for how they are integrating themselves into the landscape of this predominately Black neighborhood. There has even been a street sign hung at Harlem's major intersection on the corner of 125th and 7th Avenue that reads, "African Square." Other regions are renamed by Africans themselves, such as "Fouta Town," a heavy Fulani Muslim settlement in Brooklyn where ethnicity and religion overlap (Diouf-Kamara 1997). This ongoing Islamic and cultural activity creates a unique kind of Muslim space,⁵ a pulsating environment driving their sense of self and collective determination. These practices, then, are a major resource in their attempt to prevent a downward spiral into poor social conditions. Most observers, however, are

unaware that religion plays a crucial role in this urban transformation. Because westerners view Islam as an Arab faith, many pay no attention to the Muslim identity of these Black immigrants. Yet, few miss them wearing their wide-sleeve, *boubou* robes with tasseled hats hawking items out of brief cases in Midtown Manhattan or, perhaps, strolling Harlem streets. But this costuming represents an important way African immigrants assert their Muslim presence and impact the Black public sphere. In Harlem, this performance reworks the rhythm of the metropolis, allowing them to redefine Blackness or Black identity on their own terms.

Some researchers believe new immigrants are being absorbed into three different and sometimes disadvantageous segments of American society. Whereas traditional assimilation, for example, taught that newcomers entered the US and followed a “straight-line” path into the dominant Anglo-American culture, current scholars claim that the integration is not straight but segmented; today’s ethnically diverse migrants are incorporated into either the White middle-class, the downward path of a Black and Latino underclass, or the ethnic community characterized by tight group solidarity and rapid economic advancement (Zhou 1999). In contrast, the experiences of West African Muslims in Harlem reveal that immigrants can settle in poor Black communities, form solid ethnic niches and intergroup cooperatives, and not experience downward mobility, especially if they are able to create new types of religious capital.⁶ In other words, rather than merely self-segregating themselves as a strategy against failure, many forge alliances and build bridges between themselves and native-born Blacks and, particularly, African American Muslims. Paul Stoller argues that Islam has historically played a major role in structuring relations between African Muslims of different ethnicities (2002:30-31), and it continues to inform their business sense in the Diaspora. While money may have “no smell,” as Stoller would have it, and therefore may trump Islamic etiquette for many West Africans in New York, he asserts that “Islam has always constructed the moral framework for West African trading transactions” (2002:34). As such, their collaboration with African American Muslims is often facilitated through their shared religious precepts. This does not suggest, however, the absence of any conflict, and while the community as a whole has advanced, their presence in Harlem has not been problem free.

Starting in the early 1990s, the rapid rise of Muslims from West Africa quickly found its way into Harlem’s informal economy, creating a vibrant

African bazaar with street vendors stretched along 125th Street.⁷ Organized like traditional West African markets, the open-air sidewalk businesses created a celebratory atmosphere punctuated with a timbre of African dialects, haggling voices, and colorful displays of traditional African, domestic, and designer products. Prior to its dissolution and relocation to 116th Street in 1994, the African Market had become a major tourist attraction. Double-decker buses from Apple Tours brought scores of European sightseers on holiday to take pictures (within the protected confines of a company vehicle), capturing an exotic souvenir of New York's "authentic" African culture (Stoller 1996:778; 2002:12-14). It also provided African Americans, seeking to reclaim their African identity, with an opportunity to buy handicrafts that symbolized a piece of Africa.⁸

While some store owners benefited from the way the selling of African culture attracted new customers to the area, others felt the cultural alterity of the Market hampered business. Influential business owners provoked elected officials to enact no-vending laws, a request made against a barrage of protests and demonstrations. Still, African street merchants and other sidewalk vendors were ousted (Hicks 1994). During the conflict, each faction invoked "culture" to justify its agenda. African sellers, on the one hand, claimed that selling "African things" on 125th Street helped to revitalize the area (Stoller 1996:780). Angry store owners, on the other hand, claimed that Africans clutter the sidewalks and restrict movement, dirty and litter the streets, and that their informal habits create chaos and induce crime. Donald Trump and the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association made a similar argument to clear Midtown Manhattan of Senegalese vendors in 1985. In this way, so-called African "Third World" habits portraying chaos, informality, and uncleanliness are pitted against "First World" sensibilities representing order, regulation, and purity. Such an objectifying discourse compares African culture on a hierarchical scale with that of the West, and it is deemed incapable of occupying the same time and space. "Oh, East is East, and West is West," Rudyard Kipling once barked, "and never the twain shall meet" (Amis 1975).⁹ While Kipling's refrain in his 1892 poem actually ridiculed a polarized view of the world, it has become clear that the two spheres have indeed met. Some, despite arguments to the contrary, believe they have even clashed (Huntington 1997). In either case, with thousands of new immigrants pouring into US cities and, more often than not, settling into predominately Black communities, few can argue there has not been a genuine encounter. International

forces seamlessly link the East and the West, and the global and the local (not to mention the urban and rural) have become connected in ways we could have hardly imagined.

West African Muslim Immigration

As a result of the post-1965 immigration, which signals the unprecedented arrival of new immigrants from parts of Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, US neighborhoods are undergoing changes that have impacted more than just their demographics. The new immigration promises to bring alternative pieties and new understandings of the sacred, altering our social and religious worlds like never before. According to some estimates, Africans are arriving in the US at rates that surpass the highest figures during the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Roberts 2005). While New York remains a major point of entry for these Muslim migrants, their numbers are rapidly increasing in Boston, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles, “luring them away from New York City—especially if they have what they call ‘papers,’ namely, an employment authorization permit from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)” (Stoller 2002:7). Their attraction to these areas is somewhat straight forward. Most migrate to large cities where employment opportunities are more or less widely available and flexible, especially for those juggling several jobs and for Muslims needing special times to pray throughout the day.

Prior to urban renewal and the subsequent rise of gentrification, affordable housing in poor and working class areas was likewise appealing. More importantly, though, many early African migrants were drawn to Harlem not merely because it was economically viable, but for its reputation as a major center of Black life. That is, despite its existing reputation for crime, West Africans saw it as a Black space in the center of the US, and this gave them a glimmer of hope that they might be successful. This is very different, however, for Indian migrants, who have mostly settled in Queens, New York. Madhulika S. Khandelwal points out that while they resided in mixed communities and “interacted with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, ...many Indian immigrants continue to be uncertain about their ‘race’” (2002:4). Under the current US racial system, West Africans apparently do not have that problem. However, moving into Black Harlem (despite its changing racial landscape) means they must learn to negotiate an entirely new sense of what it means to be

Black. In his recent book, *Real Black* (2005), anthropologist, John L. Jackson, Jr., rehearses a kind of racial bricolage on what it means to navigate multiple shades of Blackness, and he untangles the significance of these claims of authenticity for a place like Harlem.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Abdullah 2001), West African immigration to the United States can be divided into three phases: (1) the Transatlantic Slave Trade between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries; (2) the period between the Prohibition of the Slave Trade Act of 1808 and 1965; and (3) from 1965 to the present. During the first two phases, Islam had been the religion of the ruling classes, the urban elite, and foreign populations under the rule of West African Muslim empires. Following this period, Islam continued to spread but this time among the masses. From the late sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, the religious campaigns of Islamic Sufi brotherhoods and other reform movements prompted mass conversion.¹⁰ Following the collapse of these Muslim kingdoms, the entire region (with the exception of Liberia, which was nonetheless heavily influenced by US economic interests) gradually fell under European control. Western nations met at the Berlin Conference in 1884 to partition West Africa into "spheres of influence" and essentially divided the area into two territories: Anglophone (English-speaking) and Francophone (French-speaking). Only the German occupation of Togoland, along with the Portuguese control of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands, remained beyond their reach. Thousands of agricultural workers emigrated out of French colonies to escape the official mandate of conscription. While laborers moved from one colonial territory to another, producing a type of "interritorial" migration (Makinwa-Adebusoye 1995:459), the next period of decolonization and African independence ushered in an international migration that is steadily becoming transnational.¹¹

By 1960, the French colonial territory in West Africa was independent, and the rise of African nations brought about new boundaries. Like the colonial partitions, these state borders cut across preexisting ethnic group settlements. Family members were forced to migrate across countries to reunite with kin or to obtain employment. Establishing the free but limited movement of goods and people within French speaking states, the CEAO (Communauté Economique d'Afrique Occidentale/the West African Economic Community) was established (Peil 1995). Allowing greater movement, but only for a 90-day period, West African countries formed ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) in 1975. This freedom of

movement has fostered a “floating population” (Makinwa-Adebusoye 1995:435), referring to a pattern of labor migration that crosses countries within Africa and, I would add, extends to western nations abroad.¹²

During independence, West Africans from former French colonies were encouraged to migrate to France as a source of cheap labor. By the next decade, however, the desire for African workers waned, and France terminated legal immigration in 1974 (Barou 1987), which was further enforced under the Pasqua law of 1993. At the same time, the US Immigration Act of 1965, which rescinded the old quota system favoring immigrants from northern and western Europe, enacted a preference system supporting family reunification for permanent residents (74 %), skilled labor (20%), and refugees seeking political asylum (6%) (Kleniewski 1997:151).¹³ This new legislation significantly opened the door of immigration to West African Muslims and many other non-Europeans. To facilitate the move between Dakar (Senegal’s capital) and New York, new direct flights were added in the mid-1980s (Perry 1997). Prompted by an economic crisis in Europe and devastatingly poor conditions in West Africa, the migration of West African Muslims to France was redirected to the US. Until the last two decades or so, the initial migration phase was dominated by West African immigrants with Christian leanings from English-speaking countries like The Gambia, Ghana, and Nigeria. Still, the desire to leave poor conditions does not mean migrants will have a place to go, especially if the point of destination is not willing to receive them (Zolberg 1989). Thus, by the 1980s, both French restrictions on immigration and a liberal US immigration policy prompted West African Muslim migration to the US.

According to the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS), the total population count for West Africans in the US was approximately 167,000 in March of 2000. The figures from the 1990 Census estimated that for West Africans claiming foreign-born status in New York, there were 2,287 Senegalese, 1,388 Ivoirians, and 1,032 Guineans in the country. When compared with the 2000 Census, only a slight difference is discernable. Because the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) only records legal immigration to the US, their numbers are invariably much lower than the US Bureau of the Census, which counts both legal and illegal residents. Some informal estimates claim that the Senegalese in New York City, for example, number anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 (Perry 1997:229). Other unofficial counts have placed Murid followers, a Sufi Brotherhood from Senegal, at 4,000 to 6,000 nationally with approx-

imately 2,500 in New York City (Malcomson 1996:30). Because many West African Muslims overstayed their visiting or student visas in the 1980s, they later took advantage of the lottery system granting amnesty to undocumented migrants. Once they are permanent residents, married men generally send for their wives and other family members. These opportunities will undoubtedly increase their numbers significantly over time. Nonetheless, while official figures are generally too low, informal estimates are usually exaggerated.

West African Islam in Black America

As mentioned above, West African Muslims claimed that the image of Harlem as a "Black Mecca" (i.e., a Black borough) initially attracted them to New York City.¹⁴ In contrast, they were also led to believe Black Americans were criminals and not to be trusted. When they encountered poor Black residents, for example, and witnessed the way some were caught in a cycle of drugs and violence, the racist stereotypes they had internalized prior to their migration were confirmed upon their arrival. Moreover, because the conduct of their non-Muslim neighbors would at times contradict their Islamic ethics, they tended to view these Harlem residents with contempt. Despite their strained relations with some Black residents, the African American Muslim community at Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, on Malcolm X Boulevard and 116th Street, served as their "proximal host," and this certainly has affected the nature of their incorporation. The term "proximal host" is used here to mean the indigenous group to which immigrants are assigned or voluntarily adopt due to their racial or ethnic affinities.¹⁵ For instance, because West African immigrants are thought to resemble Black Americans racially, they are often treated accordingly by outsiders. By the same token, many African immigrants choose to settle in Black communities and utilize Black institutions due to the racial category they share. Still, the racial designation is often resented by immigrants, especially if the group to which they are assigned is disenfranchised.

By 1990, large numbers of West African Muslims were attending the weekly *jum`ah* (Friday) prayers at Masjid Malcolm Shabazz. Realizing their growing attendance could translate into greater economic rewards, the Masjid leadership began to display signs in French instructing Africans where to pay their weekly charity. According to Hamdi, an African American Muslim pioneer and Murid convert, because of their Islamic

upbringing, West African Muslims understand that their first responsibility is to support the Masjid. "They realize," he said, "if they're successful with their religious obligations, the other aspects of their life will follow suit." He continued to say that West African Murids made donations of \$3,000 or more a week. He added that the Murids had such a strong religious network and work ethic that once they were able to raise \$75,000 in just two weeks, which was just in time to purchase a limousine for the arrival of their *shaykh* (marabout).

Some claim the same group remits nearly \$15,000 each month to their Islamic city of Touba in Senegal. Researchers report that the Banque de l'Habitat du Senegal (BHS), which opened a New York branch in 1993, handled savings and transfers for Senegalese clients amounting to \$900,000 during its first year of operation (Diouf-Kamara 1997). By 1994, due to the 50% devaluation of the CFA (French African Franc), that figure increased to \$4 million. The rise in bank dealings was because they were remitting more to help family members survive the economic crisis back home. As perhaps the only African bank operating in the US, its dealings have escalated to as much as \$7.5 million a year (Diouf-Kamara 1997:4). While these figures hardly compare to those for Ghanaian immigrants, who, over ten years ago, were estimated to remit between \$250 and \$350 million a year (Peil 1995:359), it does demonstrate the economic strength of West African Muslims in the greater New York area. This also speaks volumes about the role religion plays in their economic incorporation into Harlem. Besides the kind of tensions that can arise between members belonging to the same racial category, divergent religious orientations can force people to reconfigure their racial identities and sense of place as well.

Because Masjid Malcolm Shabazz grew out of the Black nationalist sentiment of the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Friday *khutba* (sermon) usually addresses racial themes or some aspect of race relations in the US. West African Sunnis (orthodox Muslims) felt they had different needs and wanted a sermon advocating survival through spiritual development. They also complained that their prayer attendance was much too regimented requiring, for instance, members to stop at the door to sign-in and sometimes answer questions by Masjid security. They were likewise at odds with the Black preacher style of the *khutba*, sparking frequent rejoinders from the congregation known as "call-and-response" (Crawford and Troeger 1995). Some claimed their presence was made even more uncomfortable when the Imam gave a sermon exhorting "all Africans to go

home." In 1993, when the Egyptian-led Islamic Cultural Center of New York opened on 3rd Avenue and 96th Street, many West African Sunnis left Shabazz for a more familiar religious environment. Others began attending the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (MIB), an African American orthodox community on West 113th Street and Nicholas Avenue. Because members of MIB are African Americans who use Quranic Arabic and dress in modified Islamic and African garb, African attendees felt somewhat at ease. Unlike the fees they were charged to use Masjid Malcolm Shabazz for their weddings, funerals, or meetings (a charge regarded by some as less than brotherly), MIB allowed them complete access without cost.

On the other hand, African Murids, a prominent Senegalese Sufi order, were much more familiar with the inclusion of Black themes in the khutba and stayed at Shabazz.¹⁶ In the introduction to his classic ethnography on the Murids, Donal B. Cruise O'Brien states that the "brotherhood originated in the late nineteenth century as a collective response of the Wolof...to changes brought about by French conquest (1971:1)." A major reaction to French colonization was to challenge their race-based policy and the colonial mandate of an *Islam noir* or a Black Islam (Babou 2007:156-157). Nonetheless, the Murid Sufi order, affectionately referred to as, Muridiyya, emerged out of a racialized and religious context where both Blackness and Islam are equally rehearsed. As such, many Murids in Harlem actually appreciated the inclusion of "race talk" during the Friday jum`ah service at Shabazz.

In short, while West African Sunni Muslims left Masjid Malcolm Shabazz for a more traditional host, West African Murids remained. More importantly, their respective selection in favor of a familiar congregational culture reveals an important divide between them. Prior to establishing their own masjids, both groups joined Masjid Malcolm Shabazz. Because the Sufi doctrine of Muridiyyah was not in conflict with the Black nationalist rhetoric at Shabazz, Murid followers embraced it as an appropriate platform before relocating to their own House of Islam on 137th and Edgecombe. West African Sunnis, in contrast, left Shabazz because they desired a more conventional setting, or a place more suited to their own sense of religious orthodoxy. This does not mean African Sunni Muslims reject a Black discourse at the masjid entirely. In fact, they have assumed their status as Black immigrants quite well and incorporated these conversations into their Islamic practice. What they sought, however, was a racial sensibility that would be totally subservient to their Islamic teach-

ings. African Murids, on the other hand, did not recognize a separation between the two; that is, one did not supersede the other, because race and religion were viewed as one and the same. This precept had already been central to the Nation of Islam's teachings and continued in many ways among African Americans at Shabazz. For both, their pre-migration perception of Harlem as a "Black Mecca," their practice of appropriating Black narratives into their Islamic practice, and their selection of dissimilar hosts are important ways a Black place is negotiated at African masjids in Harlem. Nonetheless, it is certainly not the only way they exert their identities onto the urban landscape.

The Murid own and operate most of the restaurants, variety stores, fashion boutiques, Islamic books, and supply shops on West 116th Street. As places of cultural production, African restaurants, for example, inscribe identity by employing religious symbols or wording like *halal* to guarantee the food is authentic and religiously "pure" (Mandel 1996). The stores also bear the name of their spiritual guides (Mbacke), their holy city in Senegal, "Touba," or a combination of both. To the outsider, however, the religious nature of these businesses is less obvious. As one African American young man once asked a Senegalese storeowner, "Man, who is this guy Touba? His name is all over the place. He must be rich!" In a sense, the young man was right to recognize something very important about the signification of these businesses. Touba is the group's spiritual center (Diouf 2000). Because it was founded by Shaykh Amadou Bamba, the holy city of Touba and the founder are viewed as one and the same. In fact, Amadou Bamba is frequently called "Serigne Touba" or "Sir Touba." As such, the sacredness of the city is transferable to other marabouts. When Murid leaders visit their *taalibés* (disciples) in New York or elsewhere, for instance, the announcement, "Touba is coming to town" (Ebin 1996:100) is made regularly. Moreover, Touba is a frame of mind. It is always carried in the heart of the devout Murid as a point of reference (*ibid.*). By hanging pictures of the founder or their Great Mosque in Senegal on the walls of their shops, Touba is there. Touba, therefore, can be reproduced and transported to create Murid space anywhere in the world. Accordingly, "making" this kind of cultural space is one way West African Muslims create transnational identities that link Touba with New York.

Other cultural performances include the daily practice of wearing African clothes. While their dress may make them easily recognizable, publicly wearing traditional African clothing is a religious act that not

only creates Muslim space but also inscribes their Africanness onto the geography of the city. In contrast to the pan-Islamic view of West African Sunnis, Murids construct their own Islamic discourse challenging Arab hegemony and notions of Black inferiority. According to their publication, "Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba inaugurated a new era in the history of Islam and of the black man. He is the first spiritual black guide massively followed by people from all over the world, thus showing that all men are issued from the same soul" (Seye 2001). Clothing can operate as a symbol of identity the wearer and the observer can read (Hendrickson 1996). It can mark a change in political orientation (Nevadomsky and Ekhaguosa 1995), or, as Roland Barthes (1983) asserted, used to signify meaning for a number of different contexts. For Harlem residents, however, the traditional clothing worn by the Murid clearly identifies them as African but not necessarily Muslim. In fact, most residents described their new neighbors as simply "African" wearing some sort of African clothing. Nonetheless, their boubou clothes and tasseled hat do not merely foreground their Africanity alone, but they represent a commitment to an age-old, West African Islamic tradition.

The Shaykh Amadou Bamba Day parade illustrates this point as well.¹⁷ Established in 1988, each year on this day, thousands of West African Murids march in a procession up 7th Avenue (Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Blvd) from 110th Street and Central Park North to 125th. Men, women, and children walk decked out in their traditional garb, full of color and regalia. What sets this parade apart from many others like the St. Patrick's Day, Puerto Rican Day and African American Day parades is the absence of elaborate floats, loud marching bands with girls dressed in bathing-like costumes throwing batons, celebrities, or even televised coverage interpreting each event for viewers. In fact, when interviewed, no spectator knew what was going on or why. Most speculated that it was "something African" but could not figure it out.

Why, after two decades, would they still undergo so much planning and organizing to have a police-escorted parade no spectator understood? Public performances like parades allow groups to rework their identity and infuse space with special meaning. Parade participants carry large banners in different languages and march chanting Islamic slogans. These actions represent the group's attempt to communicate internally and contest competing versions of membership. It also represents their struggle to put forth a Murid identity against the backdrop of other Muslim con-

stituencies in Harlem. At the same time, banners urge African Americans to embrace racial pride and their own version of Blackness. Some participants carry the Senegalese and US flag along with huge portraits of Shaykh Amadou Bamba, Shaykh Mouhammadou Mourtada Mbacke (a prominent Murid leader), and Shaykh Salih Mbacke, the Murid's *khalifa* (supreme leader). While the parade received little media attention in New York City, journalists from Senegal [and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), on a different occasion] arrived to cover the event and, according to reports, televise it in their home country for an entire week. The national symbolism of the flags and the parade's international coverage allow them to construct their Black and Muslims identities on a much larger canvas but, necessarily, within the context of Black America. Still, West African Muslims do not exist in a vacuum, and their lives are not restricted by their association with their Muslim counterparts alone. Their Islamic sensibilities are obviously influenced by their encounter with the external world, the vast space beyond masjid walls and well outside the confines of public celebrations. Consequently, their engagement with local residents opens up a whole new set of issues that challenge their presence in Black America.

The Black Encounter

African hair braiding salons are sites where Africans and African Americans interact on a regular basis. While Blacks are generally consumers, West African women either work for an American proprietor or, more recently, own their boutiques. Leslie's Hair Salon in Harlem was no exception. During my initial visit, I peeked in the window and saw more than a dozen African women dressed in traditional garb, braiding hair at each station. In fact, there were so many African workers, I was certain the shop was African-owned. I was wrong. On one occasion, I was at the salon when a Black woman came stumbling out yelling at the African worker, "Come out bitch..., I'll cut your motherfuckin' throat." At the same time, people held the African hair braider inside as she shouted back, "You better gimme my money...." With her hand in her pocketbook, the Black woman stood outside the door repeating her threat. While the situation illustrates just how explosive things can get between old residents and newcomers, the underlying factor appeared to be financial rather than cultural. But Rob, a twenty-three year old Black security worker at the Salon, disagreed.

On the day of the incident, I was struck by Rob's composure during the scuffle. He sat back in his lawn chair on the sidewalk and watched things unfold. He has lived in Harlem since the age of seven, and he appeared to have grown accustomed to witnessing these outbursts. In his mind, these conflicts were indicative of cultural differences that separated Africans from Blacks. In fact, "culture," and the way it is objectified as a "thing" representing a set of values, appears to structure relations between African Americans and other immigrants as well. Robert C. Smith's work (2006:167) on Mexicans in New York illustrates how *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) or, more precisely, *ticuanensidad* (Ticuaniness) constructs a boundary of cultural difference between them and their Black and Puerto Rican neighbors. In the view of Smith's respondent, Blacks and Puerto Ricans actually suffer because they lack "culture" entirely and not so much for having a different one. What makes this curious is how culture is often blamed by residents for the reason groups cannot get along. As the fight between the two women ended, Lenny, a Black man in his early thirties and a salon employee, left the shop and joined us outside. They began talking about the fight and their view of Africans in Harlem:

"They're not like us," Rob said, shaking his head and rocking in his chair. "They're different," he added.

"Ahhh," Lenny interjected, "Don't get me started on them."

He continued, "They're some nasty people!"

"And ruuude," he stressed.

"But," Rob blurted out, staring into space a bit, "I don't know how to explain it,

I guess it's just cultural differences."

"Yeah, I don't know," Lenny replied. "I do know they don't mess with me, 'cause they know I'll tell 'em about themselves," he griped, "but they are some nasty people."

"What do you mean by nasty?," I asked.

Lenny thought about it for a moment and said, "Ya know, just nasty."

I waited for more.

"They throw trash and stuff all over the floor, and they have an attitude," he added.

This story illustrates the assumptions some Blacks in Harlem make about what separates them from Africans. As a conversation sparked by a

conflict at the salon, Rob stated there were some “cultural differences” between Africans and Blacks he was just unable to explain. Whether he could justify his statement or not is unimportant. What is worth exploring is how he recognized differences between the two groups. He was convinced, “they’re not like us.” As such, he assumed “culture” might be the reason. Of course, people from foreign countries possess values, world-views, and share meanings that differ in certain respects from native residents. However, “cultural differences,” in and of themselves, do not create a separation. In other words, the fact that differences exist do not automatically construct a boundary forcing people to see themselves as separate and distinct. What creates and maintains the divide is the social importance or cultural meanings people attach to these differences. While Rob used culture as a way to mark the boundary that set the two of them apart, Lenny defined the line with a characteristic that gave meaning to both sides of the cultural border.

Lenny used the word, “nasty” as a term many Black residents employ to describe Africans. In *Harlemworld* (2001), John L. Jackson, Jr. quotes Paula, a thirty-eight year old Black woman, who accused Africans of acting like “they are royalty” and claimed, “they all nasty” (2001:43). He also referred to an eighteen year old Black Latina, Elisha, who criticized them for how they wear “their African shit and act like they still in Africa. All they want us for,” she asserted, “is so they can braid our hair and give us extensions” (ibid.). As Jackson’s work suggests, “nasty” is a term applied to Africans who appear pompous and antisocial. This is partially determined by the way their African dress marks a distinction between them and others in Harlem. While some embrace their cultural practices as a public display of their African heritage, others mock it as a barrier wedged between them and their African neighbors. These are clearly fault lines where a high level of distrust exists. It is a site where even services provided by African hair braiders are held in contempt. Lenny struggled to define what he meant by calling Africans “nasty,” and later associated it with unclean work habits. Being “nasty” could actually mean all sorts of things; however, whatever it means is only important when it creates a sense of emotional attachment differentiating one group from the other.

Dean, a twenty-five year old African American and life-long Harlem resident, revealed his sense of the border between Africans and Blacks. He divided Africans into two types. “There are the ones that wear traditional clothes,” he assessed, “they stick to themselves.” He added, “I don’t know if

they think there're better than us or what." As for the other, he argued that "they are the Americanized Africans, the ones you see at the [dance] club." To Dean, Africans wore their garb not merely as a marker of distinction but as a sign of superiority. Ann Miles (2004) claims in her study that migrants from Ecuador living in Queens, New York used clothing as a sort of protection that separated them from the deleterious effects of street life. Idealizing her old country ways above her newly adopted "MTV" urban world, "Rosa," Miles asserts, "proudly wore the traditional *pollera* [wide pleated skirt] that identified her as a *chola* [rural folk]" (2004:32-33). Outsiders, however, rarely understand these internal cultural musings. Instead, they are at times viewed as adverse fashion attempts and, thus, presumptuous.

West African Muslims, on the other side, believe Blacks view them as "animals." Yahya, a young man in his early twenties from Guinea, claimed, "Black Americans look down on Africa." "I don't really blame them," he continued, "it is because of what they see on TV—it's what they've been taught. All they show is famine and destruction in Africa." Despite the media distortions they believe influence the view Blacks have of them, some West African Muslims admitted they treat African Americans and particularly non-Muslims with a measure of "indifference." On other occasions, West Africans are unsure how to understand the existing tensions between them and Black Americans. In *Money Has No Smell*, Paul Stoller's West African respondents complained that they were "disappointed" when treated badly by African Americans and accused of selling their "ancestors into slavery" (2002:153).

As a familiar way to mark distinction between ethnic groups in Africa, some African Muslims see Islam as a way to partition Harlem into *dar al-harb* (outsider) and *dar al-Islam* (insider). Scholars of Islamic Studies see this dichotomy as a Muslim innovation that deviates from the principles of the religion. I have decided to translate these Arabic terms as "outsider" and "insider," respectively, because a literal rendering would miss the way they are meant to act as well-defined frontiers in Harlem. In a literal sense, they would be translated as *dar al-harb* (abode of war) and *dar al-Islam* (abode of Peace). Contrary to its religious role, Islam, in this context, is used as an organizing principle, a bifurcated way of looking at the world and those who inhabit it. Like Lenny's use of "nasty" to define the boundary dividing the two groups, West African Muslims use what they believe to be a Black misperception of Africa to justify maintaining a similar distance. What helps to erect the borderline is a condescending atti-

tude that renders Harlem residents blameworthy.¹⁸ My conversation with Rob and Lenny quickly takes a religious turn:

As we thought about Rob's answer, Lenny continued to talk about Africans, "And they call themselves Muslims?," he mocked. "I don't know what kind of Muslims they are, because the Muslims I know aren't nasty—and they're not rude!" he asserted. "Muslims are clean people and polite," Lenny added. Then he repeated, "I don't know what kinda Muslims they are."

Lenny's criticism of their Muslim affiliation is another way of disparaging the group and, thus, contesting identity. Moreover, his rejection of their self-identification reserves Muslim identity for a different group of "people," a people who are, as he would have it, not "nasty" or "rude." So, if Muslims are "polite" and "clean," West Africans in contrast cannot be Muslims. Otherwise, this would contradict his wayward depiction of them. Said differently, Lenny already had a positive image of Muslims in Harlem. Since the Africans at the shop claim to be Muslims too, the only way he can maintain his negative view of them is to reject their religious claim. In this informal setting, however, he realizes his sanction has little impact on their ability to declare their Muslim identity. In essence, his statement that he doesn't "know what kinda Muslims they are" raises two points. First, it is an assertion that brings into question and ultimately rejects their right to be Muslims. Second, even if they are acknowledged as Muslims by others, the fact that he is unaware of their "kind" places them in a strange and unusual category. Because Black Muslims have a long and reputable history in Harlem, an Islamic affiliation for these Africans is hotly contested by outsiders.

Talib Abdur-Rashid, a fifty year old Black resident and imam of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (MIB), admitted, "Coming in contact with African immigrants has challenged our ideas of Africa and Africans." He continued to say that the presence of Muslims from West Africa has compelled African American Muslims and non-Muslims to "re-adjust" their sense of themselves. It has also forced them to rethink their idea of Africa and their relationship to it. Maxine L. Margolis' work (1994:234) on New York's Little Brazil unearths a similar internal shift when disparate groups meet. In her case, however, white middle-class Brazilian immigrants in New York were forced to abate their "racist attitudes," once they encountered middle-class

African Americans in the United States. "White Brazilians contrast what they perceive as the 'aggressiveness' of African-Americans," Margolis argues, "with the deferential behavior they are used to and have come to expect from African-Brazilians back home (ibid.)." She adds, "In Brazil people from the lower echelons of society are expected to act with deference towards their purported 'social superiors.' And, because African-Brazilians are disproportionately found in the lower strata of Brazilian society, Brazilians conflate such behavior with skin color (1994:234-235)." By the same token, while West African street merchants may come across fewer African American professionals, using an "underclass" slur, such as when Africans chide Black residents for having an "unwillingness" to work (Stoller 2002:153), has less to do with any sort of "racial epiphany" that there are different kinds of Black people from various social strata. It has more to do with the type of strained relations that exist between groups and their perceptions of each other as they vie for scarce resources.

Still, it is precisely this notion of "re-adjustment," or racial "abatement" in the case of white Brazilian immigrants, that is most interesting, because it allows us to examine the dividing lines that structure our engagement with one another. Moreover, it provides a prism through which to understand the complex nature of identity formation in the US. Ahmed Shahid, a Black Muslim in his fifties and a former manager at the Harlem African Market, asserted, "We had a glorious idea of Africa in our heads, until we met 'real' Africans." He added, "That helped to change our view of things." This "re-adjustment," as Imam Talib stated, or the "change of view," mentioned by Ahmed, is an essential way Blacks and Africans contest identities, conjure new meanings, and navigate their place in Harlem society. The altercation and conversation in front of Leslie's Hair Salon speak to the informal ways these meanings are recognized and sustained. In other words, everyday interactions are places where boundaries are realized and then rehearsed. Rob was forced to articulate hidden assumptions about what divided Blacks and Africans, contentions that nonetheless played an important role in defining the Black and African presence in Harlem.

Conclusion

While Linda Beck perceptively writes about an intra-Muslim conflict in New York between West Africans and their Arab, South Asian, and African American fellows (2007), the ethnographic context of a post-9/11 climate

forces us to rethink the relevance of these internal fissures in today's world. That is to say, sectarian divisions have had a long and arduous history in Islam, as rifts emerged shortly after the religion's founding in the seventh century. In the early period, the labels obviously were not "Wahhabist" or "moderate," but they reflected similar political and theological differences with terms like "Kharijite" or "Mu'tazilite" (Aslan 2005).¹⁹ What is particularly telling, then, is not the divides that separate African Muslims from their coreligionists. Rather, beyond shifting policies that have increased surveillance and restricted movement, the events of September 11th have brought about a new cultural order, marked by a unipolar world, and a war that has implicated Islam and Muslims in unanticipated ways. As such, West African Muslims have come under much closer scrutiny prior to migration and during their sojourn in the United States. Accordingly, many undergo feelings of angst followed by bouts of depression, when pundits publically excoriate their religion and its prophet, essentially charging them and all Muslims with adherence to a faith that promotes wrong-doing or outright terrorism. Public condemnation is weighty enough for any immigrant, but it is especially daunting for these newcomers already fearful of criminal violence, racial profiling, or police brutality, in addition to a widespread anti-Muslim backlash.

As Beck has argued (*ibid.*), West African Muslims have begun to close ranks with other Muslims (mostly at the behest of their Arab and South Asian counterparts). More importantly, however, West Africans have also actively sought to educate the community and local authorities about concepts of tolerance and nonviolence in Islam (Hope 2007). They are additionally working with federal agencies as the first line of defense against terrorism, albeit with some caution against feelings of entrapment and community suspicion (Moss & Nordberg 2003). These actions illustrate their ongoing efforts to defend their religion against what they feel are gross misrepresentations perpetuated by both outsiders and factions within the faith. In short, a post-9/11 world and their reaction to it has cemented the presence of West African Muslims within these communities, dispelling the misplaced, "myth of return" idea that they will migrate to the US, grab the Golden Fleece, and return home in a few years unscathed.²⁰

It is evident that West African Muslims will continue to create practices that will help to define who they are or will become in Black America. What is less apparent is the result this will yield. While West African Murids have already developed some sort of presence for themselves, one

they transported from Senegal and reshaped in the New York context, their Africanness is heavily nuanced with Islamic and Black overtones and appear to operate on a somewhat equal footing. West African Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, arrived in Harlem with a Muslim identity that was much more universal and less particular. It will be interesting to see what forms their identities take as they become more ensconced in Black communities. Besides this, a major concern is whether or not they can afford to remain in a gentrified Harlem, especially when the high cost of upscale development and rising rents threaten their daily existence. Due to religious restrictions, they have chosen not to acquire interest-bearing loans, and this has stretched their resources to the limit. In fact, the African Sunni masjids of Aqsa and Salaam recently are attempting to stave off mounting expenses by combining their congregations. While the Murids own the building where their Touba Masjid and House of Islam are located, African Sunnis are desperately looking to purchase land or a building somewhere in Harlem.

Despite the conflict between the Black patron and West African hair braider at Leslie's Salon, it is evident African Muslims are marrying American Muslims along with some Black and Latino Christians. The manner in which Rob and Lenny understood the rift revealed crucial fault lines between African immigrants and longstanding Black Harlem residents. Even so, this episode speaks to a whole host of formulations like class differences, a clash of worldviews and values, and contrasting histories with related sensibilities, and asymmetrical access to state power. The incident can certainly be unpacked in a number of ways, which would be far beyond the scope of this article. At the same time, political coalitions are being built that involve African leaders and Black American officials. As more turn into permanent residents and US citizens, they will become concerned with their political rights and civic duties. The political campaign of Sadique Wai is a case in point. In 2001, Wai, a Sierra Leonean Muslim and reportedly the first continental African to run for political office in the US, was supported by a West African Muslim (Sunni) leadership group called, Association des Imams Africains de New York (the Association of African Imams of New York). During a meeting, the members agreed that a masjid-sponsored, voter registration drive for a West African Muslim candidate was not only important but crucial for their continued survival. While Wai's city council bid for the 35th district seat in Central Brooklyn was unsuccessful, his run signals a growing political presence of West Africans in the political process and, subsequent-

ly, marks their involvement in the power dynamics of the city. Moreover, other Sunnis are already organizing a national organization designed to mobilize West African Muslims under a single umbrella. In fact, the first national conference was held on Labor Day in 2001 at a hotel in Atlanta. Subsequent conferences are being planned for Philadelphia and New York.

While MICA (the Murid Islamic Community in America) is still getting settled in their newly renovated building, they already have plans to find a larger place to accommodate their growing community. Because of their deep religious commitment and strong work ethic, which, according to Scott Malcolmson (1996:41), “can make Protestants look like pikers,” the Murids will continue to make economic strides and, by strengthening their transnational networks, secure a better place for themselves in the US economy. Besides the diligent work of street vendors and traders, Murid intellectuals and professionals have been organized in New York since the late 1980s (Diouf 2000). Like most West African associations in the Diaspora, their parent organizations already existed in the country of origin. They have also been making sustained efforts to make Muridiyya more appealing to the US middle-class. Their attempts could increase the Order’s attraction and ease their assimilation into Black communities and middle America.

Much of this activity is occurring among the first generation. We cannot be certain whether or not their Islamic practices will be transferred to their children—especially when African Muslims are marrying Americans (both Muslims and non-Muslims). Even for those who bring brides to New York from their home countries, pressures to maintain a two-parent income have undermined the necessary time needed to pass on traditions. For some, polygyny (having a wife in the US and another in Senegal) is the answer. Still, this does not solve the problem. Many immigrants fail to realize that when they come to the US for its economic or educational opportunities, they too are being transformed in the process. The extent to which this change happens may be debatable. Nonetheless, while the parents are adjusting to life abroad, their children are raised by relatives back home with old-country ways, and, accordingly, major problems often occur when they are reunited (Waters 1999). Of course, the solution to these problems is not simple. However, if we are able to understand something about the way West African Muslims participate in the processes of immigration, Islamic practice, and encounter, perhaps we will come to grasp a bit more about the current juncture in which we live and the new global forces shaping its destiny.

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ENDNOTES

¹"Soul Brother" used in the title was originally a fraternal reference for an African American man with a special kind of cache. I use it here to speak to the ways West African Muslims are forging new Black and religious identities in African American communities across the country. The term, "hood" in the main title refers to the word, neighborhood, and often also indicates a depressed yet spirited residential community.

²Standing in the vestibule of his apartment building, Amadou Diallo was killed in a hail of 41 bullets shot by four New York City, plain-clothed policemen, who were members of a special Street Crimes Unit, on February 4, 1999. Diallo was unarmed and reaching for his wallet for identification, when the killing occurred. A \$3 million settlement was reached in January 2004. On 22 March 2003, Ousmane Zongo was shot four times and killed by Bryan Conroy, an undercover New York City police officer, during a warehouse raid on a CD/DVD pirating operation. Among other West African art dealers at the warehouse, Zongo was declared innocent and, two years later, his family was awarded a \$3 Million settlement.

³For a somewhat dated but excellent treatise on the underclass debate and the correctness of the term itself, see Katz 1993.

⁴Westerner readers may be more familiar with the word "mosque" (many believe it to be of French origin) to indicate the place of worship for Muslims. The Arabic word, *masjid*, however, is the proper term in Islam, and it literally means the place where one prostrates, presumably, before God or Allah.

⁵I employ the term "space" or, more precisely, "Muslim space" to mean the social relations (e.g., Muslim gatherings or ritual performances), cultural productions (e.g., reinvention of old narratives or traditions) and physical objects (e.g., Islamic clothing, Muslim architecture, incense aroma, Islamic bumper stickers) that signify and sustain a Muslim presence or identity. For a more detailed examination, see Metcalf 1996.

⁶The term, religious capital, along with other variations like social capital, cultural capital, and human capital, have taken on various usages and meanings over the years and across disciplines. I use the phrase here to mean the ways in which religious practices create a group network leading to the mobilization of resources and some real or imagined form of self actualization.

⁷Most of this African merchant activity was situated along 125th Street between Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox Avenue) and 7th Avenue.

⁸For an extensive discussion on the relationship between objects and religious identity, see D'Alisera 2001 and 2004.

⁹This line was excerpted from Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The Ballad of East and West," which is reprinted in many volumes. For a discussion of Rudyard Kipling's work, see Amis 1975.

¹⁰For a general religious history of Islam and a history of Islam in West Africa, see Aslan 2005 and the classic work of Clarke 1982, respectively. For a concise history of identity formation and Islamization in Black West Africa, see Abdullah 2008.

¹¹In contrast to traditional understandings of international migration that view people as uprooted from their home countries and permanently settled in their places of destination, transnational migration or transnationalism recognizes that due to globalization, which refers to the processes that produce a rapid growth of new global technologies, worldwide mass media, and an accelerated transportation system, migrants create a single field of activity that links several nations simultaneously. There are many books on all sorts of transnational formations among migrants. For one of the first in anthropology, see Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992.

¹²The concept of "floating population" was borrowed by P.K. Makinwa-Adebusoye from W.M. Freund (1981). Freund uses this term to describe how African laborers, seeking to earn cash income, were forced to migrate in and out of French and English colonial territories—creating a short-term population movement from poor subsistence agricultural areas to more prosperous plantations and mines. Following African independence, the term is applied to a similar labor migration that crosses national borders and stretches as far away as Europe and the United States.

¹³The percentages allocated for each preference category are quoted by Nancy Kleniewski (1997); however, she extracted the data from Gregory Defreitas (1994: 33).

¹⁴To protect the identity and privacy of my respondents, I have replaced their actual names and that of stores with pseudonyms. For a more extensive treatment of this ethnographic material, see Abdullah In press.

¹⁵My use of the concept is derived from the work of David Mittelberg and Mary Waters. They employ the term to explore similar tensions between American Jews and their Israeli co-religionists and, under different circumstances, African Americans and Haitian immigrants. See Mittelberg and Waters 1992.

¹⁶The name of this Sufi group is variously spelled: Murid, Mouride, or Mourid.

¹⁷For a full discussion of the Shaykh Amadou Bamba Day Parade, see Abdullah Under review.

¹⁸For a similar discussion on these tensions and how Islam is used as a marker of superiority, see Stoller 2002: 153, 165-166.

¹⁹These sorts of divisions are so endemic to Islam (and all religions and spiritual bodies have similar divisions) that there is a prophetic tradition that predicted Muslims will be divided into seventy-three sects.

²⁰Besides the unfamiliar fact that countless Muslims from West Africa worked at the World Trade Center and died in the attacks, including the cousin of Masjid Aqsa's Ivorian imam, Souleimane Konate, many believe that because West African Harlem business owners were Muslim, customers ostracized them the day following 9/11. See Pryce 2001.

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