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COMPARISON OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND IMMIGRANT-MOSQUE PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

The American-Muslim community is composed largely of first generation immigrants—mainly from South Asia and Arab lands—and first generation African-American converts. Although this demographic is changing as the second generation of both immigrants and converts slowly come of age, the reality remains that relations between African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims constitute one of the most decisive dynamics in the American-Muslim community. Works on the African-American Muslim experience have described an uneasy and often contentious relationship between African Americans and immigrants.¹ Peter Skerry, in a recent article observes, “African-American Muslims tend to see the world very differently from their immigrant coreligionists. Relations between African-American and immigrant Muslims are strained at worst, wary at best.”²

Differences between African-American and immigrant

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¹See Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking towards the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²Peter Skerry, “America’s Other Muslims,” *Wilson Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 23.

Muslims are long standing, and the origin and history of the two groups are extremely distinct. African-American Islam emerged in the 1920s, on the heels of Marcus Garvey, as a challenge by African Americans to white racism and white intellectual hegemony. More recently, large numbers of African Americans converted to Islam in the 1960s and 1970s, imbued with the spirit of Black power and Black consciousness. Immigrant Muslims, arriving in large numbers in the 1970s, came from a fractured Muslim world, some seeking economic betterment, and others fleeing political oppression. Each group carries its own unique cultural baggage that shapes its understanding of Islam. Class differences are also a distinguishing feature between the two. Many immigrant Muslims have fulfilled the American dream by becoming highly educated and well-to-do, while many African-American Muslims seem to be still working their way up America's economic ladder. Reflecting these differences, African-American and immigrant Muslims have historically lived separate existences within organizations made up of their own kind.

There are signs, however, that these differences are not as real as they appear and that they are in fact lessening as this first generation of immigrants and converts mature. The clearest sign might be the diversity of American mosques: only 7 [percent] of American mosques are attended exclusively by one ethnic group and African Americans are found in 87% of all mosques.³

From this perspective, the sharp differences, founded in differing histories and cultures, are in fact ameliorating as

³Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Perl, and Bryan T. Froehle, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait* (Washington, DC: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2001), 15.

immigrants become more acculturated to America and African-American Muslims become more acculturated to Islam and the Muslim world. By focusing on differences, it is possible to miss the emerging trajectory of convergence. Peter Skerry's article, for instance, highlights the differences between the annual conventions of the major African-American Muslim group (Imam W. Deen Mohammed's The Mosque Cares) and the major immigrant group (Islamic Society of North America), which convened at the same time, in the same city.⁴

The differences are real, but it is also true that these conventions scarcely took notice of one another in the past; but since the 1990s, the leaders of each organization have on many occasions addressed the other's convention. Arrangements now exist whereby registration in one convention is honored by the other.

U. S. Mosque Life Survey

The purpose of this essay is to explore the differences (and similarities) between African-American and immigrant-mosque participants by using the data of the U.S. Mosque Life Survey (Mosque Survey), which was conducted in 2005. This survey is part of a wider study of all religious congregations in America (U.S. Congregational Life) and a study of African-American Christian congregations (Members Voice Project). All three studies employ virtually identical questionnaires.

⁴Skerry, "America's Other Muslims," 19.

Selected Mosques

The Mosque Survey selected fifty mosques, which are representative of American mosques in terms of ethnicity, size, and region. Of these, twenty-five participated in the survey with the attendees completing a questionnaire at their mosques. These twenty-five mosques consisted of fourteen attended by immigrants, seven with both immigrants and African Americans, and four with African Americans. The total number of mosque participants completing questionnaires was 1270, of which 781 were identified as first-generation immigrants and 178 were African American. The remaining participants were second-generation immigrants and other converts. The writer used only immigrant and African-American responses.

Respondents

Type	Number	Percentage
Immigrants	781	61%
African Americans	178	14%
Second Generation	203	16%
Other Converts	108	9%

(unclassified respondents due to missing data: 146)

African-American participants include those who attend two mosques associated with the leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed (WDM mosque); two mosques historically Sunni African-American mosques (HSAAM mosque); and African Americans who attend immigrant mosques (mixed mosque). Imam Mohammed is the son and successor to Elijah

Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam. Following Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, Imam Mohammed courageously transformed the Nation of Islam into a mainstream Muslim organization, jettisoning not only the Nation's sectarian, Islamic theology but also the radicalism and harsh rhetoric against America. The HSAAM are those mosques that did not follow Elijah Muhammad in the past and do not presently follow Imam Mohammed. Instead, they have sought to embrace normative Islam. Their roots, like the Nation of Islam, are founded in the 1930s; but while the Nation experienced great growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the HSAAM languished. However, since the 1970s, HSAAM have experienced significant growth; their numbers are now close to WDM mosques.

**African-American Participants in
the U.S. Mosque Life Survey**

Type of mosque attended	Number	Percentage
WDM Mosque	22	12%
HSAAM Mosque	55	31%
Mixed Mosque	101	57%

Educational Background and Income Levels

Socio-economic indicators are quite different for African-American and immigrant-mosque participants. In general, African-American mosque goers have a lower educational and income level than their immigrant counterparts. Immigrant Muslims constitute one of the most edu-

cated and highest salaried groups in America. Among immigrants participating in this survey, 43 percent have attained a masters degree or better, compared to 10 percent for African-American participants. Over 63 percent of immigrant-mosque participants have an income above \$50,000 as compared to 23 percent for African-American mosque participants.

Educational Background

	Immigrants	African Americans
High school or less	11%	41%
Some college	9%	28%
College or advanced degree	80%	31%

Income Levels

	Immigrants	African Americans
Less than \$10,000	7%	26%
10,000-24,999	12%	21%
25,000-49,999	18%	30%
50,000-74,999	19%	12%
75,000-99,999	17%	6%
100,000 or more	28%	5%

Conservatism/Liberalism of Participants

The U.S. Mosque Survey gauged the religious conservatism/liberalism of mosque participants. The main question queried participants' understanding of how the Quran and *sunnah* (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad), the two authoritative texts of Islam, are to be followed. The response categories are as follows:

1. Follow Quran and *sunnah* in “a more flexible fashion, in light of historical and modern circumstances and the purpose of the Law.” This choice might be called a contextual approach, meaning that the authoritative texts of Islam are to be adhered to but with an eye to historical circumstances and the spirit of the texts. This approach tends to be more flexible and, therefore, more liberal than the other categories.
2. Follow one particular *madhhab*. A *madhhab* refers to one of the classical legal schools of thought; therefore, a person who follows one of these schools is most likely to be more traditional in understanding and practicing Islam.
3. Follow Quran and *sunnah* in a “more conservative fashion, in accordance to the opinions of the great scholars of the past.” This option means that participants do not feel bound to any of the classical legal schools, yet still look to the great scholars of the classical period for answers. This approach, although varied, tends to be more conservative.
4. Follow the *salafi* school of thought. The *salafi* school of thought refers to the position that all Islamic issues should be referred back to the sources of Islam—Quran and *sunnah*—and the opinions of the early scholars (the *salaf*) as opposed to following any one particular classical school. The *salafi* school of thought in its recent manifestation tends to be literalistic and conservative in its interpretation of Islam.

5. Accept Quran and *sunnah* "but not necessarily practice their injunctions." The last response category encompasses the position that Quran and *sunnah* and, therefore, Islamic Law should no longer be considered obligatory. This position is comparable to those liberal religious adherents who view their religious texts as being historical and not necessarily the word of God.

Islamic Approach and Immigrant-African-American Respondents

	Immigrant	African American
Contextual	42%	25%
Classical School	21%	18%
Great scholars	24%	32%
<i>Salafi</i>	4%	11%
Liberal	1%	1%
Don't Know	7%	13%
	(N=742)	(N=170)

Total N=912 After eliminating "Liberal" because of its small number, chi-square is significant at .000 level. Cramer's V=.178 and is significant at .000 level.

Mosque participants, both immigrant and African-American, hold varied views on understanding Islam. Overall, however, African-American mosque participants tend to be more conservative. Among immigrants, 42 percent espouse the more flexible contextual approach, while 25 percent of African American holds the same view. Almost one-third of African Americans (32 percent) adhere to the more con-

servative approach of following the great classical scholars, compared to 24 percent of immigrants.

Closer inspection, however, reveals that African Americans are divided on this question: the followers of WDM tend to be more liberal than immigrants and the HSAAM Muslims tend to be more conservative.

Islamic Approach and African-American Mosque Participants

	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
Contextual	50%	18%	24%
Classical School	23%	29%	11%
Great scholars	14%	27%	38%
<i>Salafi</i>	0%	14%	11%
Liberal	0%	0%	1%
Don't Know	14%	12%	14%
	(N=22)	(N=51)	(N=97)

Exactly half of WDM mosque participants follow the contextual approach, but only 18 percent of HSAAM participants and 24 percent of the African Americans who worship in mosques mixed with immigrant- and African-American attendees chose the contextual approach. As for the more conservative approach of following the great scholars, WDM mosque goers score below immigrants and HSAAM/mixed mosque participants score above immigrants. In the most conservative approach of following *salafi* thought, 14 percent of HSAAM and 12 percent of mixed mosque attendees prefer this line of thinking; no WDM attendee chose it.

Significantly, only 1 percent of both immigrant- and

African-American mosque participants indicate the position that the texts are accepted but not followed. Virtually all mosque goers, therefore, accept the Quran and *sunnah* as authoritative, not simply historical texts.

The other question that probes the conservative/liberal attitudes of mosque participants asks whether the respondent agrees or disagrees with the statement: "All the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth." Unlike the question on Islamic approach, however, the results of this question do not show a statistically significant difference between the responses of immigrants and African Americans. Both African Americans and immigrants are fairly divided on this issue, although African Americans are slightly more likely to disagree with this statement.

**Immigrant- African-American Responses to
"All religions are good at finding ultimate truth."**

	Immigrant	African American	U.S. Study
Agree	32%	25%	52%
Neutral	15%	14%	18%
Disagree	53%	62%	31%
		(N=767)	(N=176)

Total N=943 Not including the U.S. Study, Chi-square is not statistically significant.

Likewise, among African-American mosque participants, there is little difference between the three groups, although fewer African Americans who attend HSAAM and mixed mosques agree with the statement.

African-American Responses to "All religions are good at finding ultimate truth."

	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
Agree	36%	20%	24%
Neutral	5%	20%	12%
Disagree	59%	60%	64%
	(N=22)	(N=55)	(N=99)

View of America

The sharpest difference between immigrant- and African-American mosque participants is their differing view of America. In general, African-American mosque goers are much more critical of American society than immigrants. One of the questions that attempts to capture the mosque participant's view of America asks the respondent to agree or disagree with the statement: "America is an immoral society." While almost three-fourths (74 percent) of African Americans agree that American society is immoral, a little over one-third (35 percent) of immigrants agree. Only 8 percent of African-American mosque participants disagree with the statement as compared to 38 percent of immigrants.

**Immigrant/African-American Responses
to "America is an immoral society."**

	Immigrant	African American
Strongly agree	10%	35%
Agree	24%	39%
Neutral	28%	18%
Disagree	29%	6%
Strongly disagree	9%	2%
	(n=731)	(n=173)

Total n=904 Chi-square is significant at .000 level.
Gamma=-.609 and is significant at .000 level.

All African-American Muslim respondents, no matter the mosque they attend, are more critical of American society than immigrants; and HSAAM attendees are the most critical. Among HSAAM mosque participants, 81 percent agree or strongly agree that America is immoral while 68 percent of WDM mosque goers agree or strongly agree. Even more telling, however, is that 44 percent of HSAAM attendees strongly agree with the statement, while only 18 percent of WDM attendees strongly agree.

**African-American Responses to
"America is an immoral society."**

	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
Strongly agree	18%	44%	33%
Agree	50%	37%	38%
Neutral	23%	15%	20%
Disagree	5%	2%	8%
Strongly disagree	5%	2%	1%
	(n=22)	(n=54)	(n=97)

Another divergence of view on American society can be seen in responses to the statement, "The U.S. is a better country than most other countries in the world." Although the differences between African Americans and immigrants are less sharp, the differences are still evident and statistically significant. Among African-American mosque goers, a total of 41 percent agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 61 percent of immigrants agree or strongly agree. While one-fourth of African Americans disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, only 17 percent of immigrants disagree or strongly disagree with it.

Immigrant/African-American Responses to "The U.S. is a better country than other countries."

	Immigrant	African American
Strongly agree	21%	10%
Agree	40%	31%
Neutral	22%	34%
Disagree	13%	18%
Strongly disagree	4%	7%
	(n=736)	(n=173)

Total n=909 Chi-square is significant at .000 level.

Gamma=.297 and is significant at .000 level.

Among African-American Muslims, WDM attendees are closer to immigrants in their responses, and HSAAM/mixed attendees are significantly more critical: over 38 percent of HSAAM mosque goers disagree/strongly disagree with the statement that the U.S. is a better country, compared to 10 percent of WDM mosque goers who disagree/strongly disagree.

**African-American Responses to "The U.S. is
a better country than other countries."**

	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
Strongly agree	27%	4%	10%
Agree	32%	33%	29%
Neutral	32%	25%	39%
Disagree	5%	23%	18%
Strongly disagree	5%	15%	3%
	(n=22)	(n=54)	(n=97)

Related to one's view of America is the willingness to participate in American politics. Mosque participants were asked if they favor Muslims' involvement in the political process. While only a small minority opposes political participation, immigrant-mosque participants are much more supportive of this involvement than African Americans: 92 percent of immigrants agree/strongly agree that Muslims should participate in the political process, while 77 percent of African Americans agree/strongly agree. A greater number of African-American mosque goers are neutral about political participation—17 percent of African Americans versus 5 percent of immigrants.

Immigrant- African-American Responses to “Muslims should participate in the American political process.”

	Immigrant	African American
Strongly agree	74%	47%
Agree	18%	30%
Neutral	5%	17%
Disagree	3%	6%
	(n=766)	(n=174)

Total n=940 Chi-square is significant at .000 level. Gamma=.471 and is significant at .000 level.

The muted support for political participation among African-American mosque goers is attributable to HSAAM/mixed mosque participants. WDM mosque goers evidence the same strong support for political participation as immigrants, while HSAAM/mixed mosque goers are significantly lower: a little over two-thirds (68 percent) of HSAAM mosque goers agree/strongly agree with political participation. Ninety-one percent of WDM attendees agree/strongly agree. Well over one-fourth (27 percent) of HSAAM mosque goers are neutral and, therefore, lukewarm about political participation.

African-American Responses to “Muslims should participate in American political process.”

	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
Strongly agree	73%	39%	46%
Agree	18%	29%	34%
Neutral	5%	27%	14%
Disagree	5%	6%	6%
	(n=22)	(n=52)	(n=100)

A lessened support for political participation among HSAAM/mixed mosque goers, however, does not translate into lower rates of voter registration. In fact, more HSAAM attendees are registered to vote than the others: 84 percent of HSAAM as compared to 82 percent for WDM and 71 percent of mixed-mosque participants. However, more WDM mosque participants voted in the last presidential election than the others: 77 percent of WDM as compared to 64 percent for HSAAM and 53 percent for mixed-mosque goers.

Valued Activities

African-American and immigrant-mosque participants do not demonstrate a marked difference in how they view the function of the mosque. Mosque participants were asked to indicate the aspects of the mosque that they "personally most value" and were given twelve distinct choices. Both groups indicate that the traditional role of the mosque as a site for worship and religious learning is most valued. The first four choices of African-American and immigrant-mosque goers are almost the same, although in different order: *khutbahs* [sermons] and talks on religious issues, daily congregational *salah* [prayer], *khutbahs* on contemporary issues, and special lectures and programs.

**Ranking of Mosque Activities
by Mosque Participants**

	Immigrant	African Am	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
	Ranking (percentage)				
<i>Khutbahs</i> on religious issues	3 (32%)	1 (48%)	1 (55%)	4 (44%)	1 (50%)
Daily <i>salah</i>	2 (36%)	2 (35%)	3 (32%)	1 (44%)	2 (31%)
<i>Khutbahs</i> on contemporary issues	4 (24%)	3 (27%)	2 (46%)	6 (20%)	3 (27%)
Special lectures and programs	1 (37%)	4 (25%)	4 (23%)	5 (24%)	3 (27%)
Programs for children or youth	6 (20%)	5 (20%)	7 (14%)	8 (16%)	5 (23%)
Openness to diversity	7 (17%)	6 (19%)	7 (14%)	3 (26%)	6 (17%)
Care for one another	11 (9%)	7 (16%)	7 (14%)	3 (26%)	9 (12%)
Social justice emphasis	5 (22%)	8 (15%)	4 (23%)	9 (13%)	7 (14%)
Reach out to those not attending	10 (13%)	9 (12%)	7 (14%)	7 (18%)	11 (8%)
Adult education classes	12 (7%)	10 (11%)	6 (18%)	10 (9%)	10 (10%)
Social activities	8 (17%)	11 (10%)	11 (5%)	12 (6%)	7 (14%)
Mosque full-time school	9 (16%)	12 (8%)	11 (5%)	10 (9%)	11 (8%)

The major differences between what African Americans and immigrants most value is that African Americans desire "practical care for one another in times of need" and immigrants value "wider community care or social justice emphasis." African-American mosque goers rank "care for one another" as their seventh choice while immigrants rank it eleventh, near the bottom of the list. The high ranking of "care for one another" is due to HSAAM mosque goers ranking it as their third most valued aspect of the mosque. WDM and mixed-mosque attendees rank it lower than third but still higher than immigrant-mosque participants. The ideal of the mosque as a nurturing, protecting community for its members is more highly regarded among African American than immigrants.

Ironically, immigrant-mosque goers rank "social justice" activities of the mosque much higher than African Americans. However, a clear split exists between African Americans, because WDM mosque participants rank "social justice" as their fourth priority, tied with "lectures," but HSAAM/mixed mosque attendees rank "social justice" much lower—seventh for mixed mosques goers and ninth for HSAAM respondents.

Mosque participants were also asked whether they view the mosque as "a place for prayer and spiritual development" or as "a center for the Muslim community where all types of activities takes place." The choice of viewing the mosque as a place of prayer approximates the traditional view of the mosque as a site for performing ritual prayer and educational activities; whereas, the second choice indicates a preference for a mosque that functions as a community center. The surprising results are that immigrants favor the view of the mosque as a community center (70 percent)

while African-American mosque participants are more split, the majority (59 percent) favoring the mosque as a place of prayer. The differences among African Americans are significant as WDM mosque goers are similar to immigrants in preferring to view the mosque as a community center, whereas HSAAM/mixed mosque participants see the mosque primarily as a place of prayer. This result bolsters the conclusion that HSAAM/mixed mosque participants put greater emphasis on the more religious aspects of Islam such as the daily congregational prayers and religious learning as opposed to the more outward aspects of Islam such as involvement in social action.

Involvement

The Mosque Survey asked many questions about the activities of mosque participants in various social and community activities, inside and outside the mosque. In virtually all of the listed activities, African-American mosque participants are more involved than immigrants. The largest difference is in *dawah* [missionary] and outreach activities where one-third of African Americans are regularly involved, as opposed to only 16 percent of immigrant-mosque participants. Similarly, in terms of community service/social justice activities, African Americans are more involved than immigrants: 28 percent of African Americans participate in these types of activities compared to 18 percent of immigrants. The only activity in which immigrant- and African-American mosque goers are equally involved is contacting a politician about a public issue: 16 percent of immigrants and 17 percent of African Americans had done so in the last twelve months.

**Percentage of Mosque Participants
Involved in Mosque Activities**

	Immigrant	African Am	WDM	HSAAM	Mixed
<i>Dawah</i>					
(outreach activities)	16%	33%	27%	38%	32%
Solve community problem	28%	35%	50%	36%	32%
Community service					
/advocacy	18%	28%	54%	27%	23%
Contacted politician	16%	17%	27%	13%	17%
Social service (outside mosque)	26%	31%	36%	36%	28%
Advocacy/justice (outside mosque)	8%	13%	32%	9%	12%

WDM mosque participants are significantly more involved in social justice/community service activities than HSAAM/mixed mosque participants. Over half (54 percent) of WDM mosque goers are involved in community service activities as opposed to 36 percent of HSAAM and 32 percent of mixed-mosque participants. Although all three African-American groups are more involved than immigrants, there are marked differences for involvement in social justice groups not connected to the mosque. Almost one-third (32 percent) of WDM mosque participants are involved in social justice/community service groups in comparison to 9 percent of HSAAM and 12 percent of mixed-mosque participants. The one activity in which HSAAM/mixed mosque goers are more involved is *dawah* (outreach activities) with approximately 38 percent of HSAAM and 32 percent of mixed-mosque participants are involved in *dawah* activities as opposed to 27 percent of WDM participants.

Conclusion

Results from the U.S. Mosque Life Study demonstrate many differences between African-American and immigrant-mosque participants, but overall the differences are not wide. The picture is complicated because major differences are also evidenced among African-American mosque goers: mosque participants who attend mosques associated with the leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed are often divergent from participants attending either historically Sunni African-American mosques or immigrant mosques.

The most decisive difference between African-American and immigrant-mosque participants is their view of America. All African Americans are significantly more critical of America than immigrants. Immigrants are undoubtedly favorably comparing America to their home countries—especially in terms of politics and business—and African Americans are reflecting their wounded relation with America's racist past and also unfavorably comparing America to the ideals of Islam. This difference is most likely reflected in the oft-heard criticism by African-American Muslims that immigrants are desirous of assimilating into America.

In terms of Islamic conservatism/liberalism, WDM mosque goers are slightly less conservative than immigrants and HSAAM/mixed mosque participants are slightly more conservative than immigrants. Ironically, African Americans who attend immigrant mosques are the most conservative and, therefore, the most divergent from immigrants; while WDM mosque goers, who probably have the least relationship with immigrants, are more similar to immigrants. In a similar fashion, both WDM and immigrant-mosque goers strongly support political participation while a significant

portion of HSAAM (33 percent) and mixed mosque goers (20 percent) are neutral or disagree with this issue.

Immigrants and African Americans do not differ greatly in how they prioritize mosque activities. Overall, African Americans are more involved than immigrants in activities, both inside and outside the mosque, that deal with community activism and social justice issues. While immigrant-mosque participants value community involvement, they are not involved in these activities to the same extent as African Americans. WDM mosque goers exhibit the greatest involvement in social service and social justice activities, while HSAAM/mixed mosque goers are more involved in *dawah* activities.

The picture of the relationship of African Americans and immigrants is not simple. In certain respects, such as Islamic approach and political participation, WDM and immigrant-mosque participants are fairly similar. All African-American mosque goers are different from immigrants in their more critical view of America and their great involvement in social activism, although immigrants report high regard for social activism. African American and immigrant mosque goers are largely similar in how they prioritize the work of the mosque.

Differences between African-American and immigrant-mosque participants are real, but they do not seem overwhelming. At the very least, the door leading to strengthened relations between the two groups appears open. More studies over time should reveal the direction of this relationship—whether the differences between African Americans and immigrants are widening or receding.