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Introduction

Where, in what manner, and under whose direction the education of African American Muslim girls and boys would occur emerged as both a private and a political issue as early as the 1930s when leaders of the original Nation of Islam (NOI)¹ clashed with public officials in the city of Detroit, Michigan. Following the directives of their leaders and their shared disenchantment with a public school curriculum they believed to be heavily influenced by racist ideologies that denied the humanity and historical contributions of black people, members of the newly organized "Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America," withdrew their children from the local educational system and began to home school them. One of the earliest instructors who also defied local authorities was Clara Muhammad, wife of Elijah Muhammad, architect of the movement that would transform the lives of tens of thousands of African Americans. By the 1960s, this home schooling effort evolved into the "University of Islam," and by the mid-1970s, into a nationwide network of day and weekend schools known today as the Clara Muhammad Schools (although some high schools are named in honor of Elijah's son and successor, W. D. Mohammed), whose benefits included a new sense of personal empowerment, a rigorous call to discipline, an emphasis on family structure and values, and a clear standard of moral behavior. For young African American Muslim girls, Clara Muhammad Schools, along with similar Islamic schools in the United States, provide an empowering educational environment that relieves them of being viewed as "curiosities" because of their dress, holidays, and religious practices. In an environment in which they are not "the Other," Muslim girls avoid being singled out on matters of religion and race and are less likely to experience feelings of isolation.

Origins of education systems for African American Muslims

The year 1932 unveiled a series of events that illustrated why women were attracted to the patriarchal structure of the NOI, while also finding an environment that afforded them a tangible sense of their own agency, womanhood, and an affirming educational space for their daughters and sons. Throughout the United States, no curriculum within the public educational system placed black people at the center of civilization, provided positive images of black family or communal life, or pointed to the significant contributions made by Americans of African ancestry. The few textbooks or teaching lessons that intentionally featured black people served only to extend negative stereotypes and foster black self-hate. Moreover, the larger society – in this case, inclusive of members of predominantly Christian black communities – routinely reacted negatively to this new religious subculture. Their lack of acceptance filtered into student and teacher attitudes toward young members of the NOI.

This was the atmosphere in which W. D. Fard, the movement's founder, began to encourage his followers to withdraw their children from the public school system of those he called the “white devils” and instruct them in a home school environment. Elijah and Clara, also distrustful of the public school curriculum that promoted the culture of whites and reflected “lies” about blacks, complied. They envisioned an educational institution that would represent a counter discourse on black inferiority and promote the NOI as a historically black religious movement. Clara and most of her Muslim sisters possessed little formal education themselves. Still, they were familiar enough with processes for values and knowledge production to struggle to build independent religious educational structures as one means of wresting control of the minds of their children from the public school system and simultaneously helping to preserve the religious identity of their offspring. Consequently, the six children of Clara and Elijah became the first students in the newly formed “University of Islam,” operating from the home of its first instructor, Clara Muhammad. In actuality, the “university” was an elementary and secondary school with curriculum that matched the general education subjects taught in adjacent public schools, but which also featured lessons in what they understood to be Islamic studies and black history. Initially it was not a gender-segregated environment because all the students were members of the same primary or extended family. As other families enrolled, however, girls would sit on one side of the room, boys on the other. The goal was to form a school site inside each Temple (now mosque) location. By investing her talents, energy, and faith in this endeavor, Clara's work mirrored the slogan of the National Association of Colored Women: “lifting as we climb.” It was within the original NOI that she and other Muslim women would respond to their marginalization by the larger society, carve out space in which they could direct their activist consciousness, and mirror Muslim womanhood for their daughters.

Two years later, in 1934, a court order to close the home schooling project and the arrest of Elijah along with 13 teachers and administrators led to a public protest march on police headquarters in Detroit. The presence of independent educational systems developed to address the cultural and religious heritage of students was not unusual, and discontent with public education was shared by a number of minority groups in the United States. For example, Roman Catholic schools in America began in the nineteenth century in response to Protestant domination of the public schools and Catholic church leaders developed a plan to build a school in every parish. While the NOI endeavor did not attract harassment from such racist groups as the Ku Klux Klan, as the Roman Catholic Church did in 1920, government pressure against the assembly of NOI members was mounting; thus, building code violations were cited at meeting locations, negative reports were in the press, and there were accusations of the movement's “cult-like” status. Moreover, home schooling was still illegal in Detroit in 1934. Such realities complicated the efforts of an organization that could not always rely on landlords to renew leases on property in which classes were conducted.

The budget was low and supplies were scarce at Clara's school, compelling this woman, affectionately considered the mother of the NOI in North America, to call upon her creativity to enhance the learning of her students. Daily, Clara's youngsters gathered around the dining room table, pencils in hand, awaiting instructions from their teacher – a woman who never advanced beyond the seventh or eighth grade herself – who would write out their spelling and reading assignments on pieces of lined paper. Clara's own ideas, beliefs and family history as well as Fard's teachings became sentences to be copied, word groups to be memorized, paragraphs that helped develop penmanship. While textbooks were not available initially, subjects still included basics, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as the history of the founding of the NOI and rebuttals of erroneous myths about the origins of black people. Within their own educational system, a new history was being taught that placed black people at the center of civilization and made them feel good about themselves. Mohammed, Clara's fifth son and her husband's successor, characterized their lessons this way: “It was a curriculum that made a point of ignoring world history as we know it and United States history as we know it. And we learned to think, to have our own thoughts. She'd ask questions and sought our opinions.”

The “university” in twenty-first-century America

For more than 30 years the University of Islam succeeded in providing African American children with a world-view that promoted self-knowledge, self-reliance, and self-discipline. After Mohammed succeeded his father as leader of the original NOI in 1975, he renamed the educational enterprise the Clara Muhammad Schools in honor of his mother. In a series of reorganizations, Mohammed guided the original NOI onto a path of traditional Islam and its supporters came to be known as the American Society of Muslims.²

Today, each of the more than 60 educational units nationwide under Mohammed's leadership is affiliated with a local mosque community. Through the years, these institutions have been joined by dozens more founded by other American Muslim organizations. Contemporary Clara Muhammad Schools strive to create a spiritual educational experience that is also relevant to young Muslims growing up in a secular society, an important dimension as the schools teach Muslim and non-Muslim youth. Many students consistently receive academic achievements awards; for example, the Clara Muhammad School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was the overall first-place winner at the 2005 Academic Olympics sponsored by Marquette University. The holistic education students receive was promoted on National Public Radio (NPR) a year later, when the female varsity basketball team at W. D. Mohammed High School in Atlanta, Georgia, advanced to postseason play for the first time.

These institutions are among approximately 200 around the United States that comprise a national network of Islamic schools where students at the elementary and high school levels follow a curriculum of standard academics regulated by educational board guidelines in addition to studies in Arabic, the Qur'ān, and Islam. Learning in an Islamic environment, students may convey the peace of Allah hundreds of times day as they greet each other with “As-salām ‘alaykum.” They begin each day with assembly, pray five times daily, and wear uniforms, including a head covering for female students. They must also adhere to strict regulations, which for some young girls means not wearing make-up or nail polish. Girls benefit from interaction with African American Muslim women role models, the freedom and creativity of participation in local cheerleading squads, the intellectual growth of engagement in college preparatory courses, and the emotional support of being around educators who celebrate their gender as well as their African American heritage.

Some schools in the network are private, dependent upon tuition fees and contributions from parents as well as community fundraising events. Other schools receive government funding as “choice” schools and are awarded government vouchers, which means that these schools are open to families that are more culturally, economically, and religiously diverse. In 2005, several Clara Muhammad Schools demonstrated their Muslim charitable values and opened their doors to primarily African American students who were victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Islamic schools are flourishing and expanding throughout the United States. In the process, they are strongly influencing the religious education and identity formation of African American Muslim girls and boys. Students are exposed to educators who reinforce their Islamic identity, faith, and values, and model before them how one can be American and Muslim.

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