

African American Muslim Mosques and Philanthropy

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Abstract

African American mosques—both syncretic and mainstream—have been active since the 1930s in striving to serve the African American community with a message of moral uplift and activities aimed at economic empowerment and achieving social justice. Charitable giving for African American Muslims is encased in the word sadaqah, which in Islam refers to all types of giving from monetary to service to kind or just behavior toward others. Thus, sadaqah fits very well into the more recent understanding of philanthropy, which broadens the definition of philanthropy to include volunteerism. Based on the US Mosque Survey 2020, African American mosques are still active in serving the African American community, although their financial capabilities are limited.

Keywords: *Islam, African American Muslims, mosques, philanthropy, American Muslims*

The African American mosque resides at the center of the experience of African American Muslims. As a consequence, the African American mosque has been the main recipient of African American Muslim philanthropy—much like the Black church in the experience of African American Christians. This article will explore the topic of philanthropy among African American Muslims with special focus on their mosques.

A focus on African American Muslim philanthropy is timely as the definition of philanthropy has expanded. Speirn and Washington (2012) write,

Throughout history, the word “philanthropy” has been used almost exclusively to describe the generous giving of large sums of money.... In recent years the definition of philanthropy has begun to widen to include a larger swath of human generosity. Under this budding definition, “philanthropy” encompasses any-size

contributions not just from the wealthy, but from people of every income bracket. It includes donations not just of money but of time and know-how.

The expansion of the concept of philanthropy to include not only the large gifts of social elites but also the charitable gifts of small amounts of money and volunteer efforts opens the door for the study and appreciation of African American and African American Muslim philanthropy. Using this fresh look at African American philanthropy, the conclusion of Carson applies equally to African American Muslims.

Freeman's (2020) understanding of African American philanthropy in his book *Madam C. J. Walker's Gospel of Giving* fits very well within the concept of giving among African American Muslims: "African American philanthropy is better defined as a medley of beneficent acts and gifts that address someone's needs or larger social purpose that arise from a collective consciousness and shared experience of humanity" (pp. 3–4). Freeman's social purpose is the uplift of Black people, which is the clear motivation of much of African American Muslim philanthropy. Freeman's "collective consciousness and shared experience" is the response to the centuries of slavery, segregation, and racism that African American people have suffered through. It is a response that encompasses the struggle to resist and uplift their people from their shared oppression. In past decades, most African Americans came to Islam because they saw it as a vehicle to uplift and empower Black people, and thus African American philanthropy has similar characteristics as African American Muslim philanthropy.

Historical Background

African American Muslims have been part of the American narrative since the beginning of the United States. Gomez (2005), in his definitive work, says, "... of the estimated 481,000 Africans imported into British North America during the slave trade, nearly 255,000 came from areas influenced by Islam. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Muslims arrived in North America by the thousands, if not tens of thousands" (p. 166). Austin (1984), in his ground-breaking work estimates that 10% of enslaved Africans who were brought to these shores were Muslims (p. 15). Where African Muslims existed in relatively large numbers, as in the coastal areas of the Carolinas and Georgia, there is a likelihood that they established rooms or nondescript shacks as clandestine places of worship. However, by the time of the Civil War and after the third generation of enslaved African Muslims, Islamic practice and identity had disappeared.

Islam was rediscovered by African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. The African American Muslim experience from its beginning has been marked by

two trends. One trend is a syncretic Islam where elements of mainstream Islam (the Islam practiced by the vast majority of Muslims throughout the world) have been mixed with various beliefs and practices outside of mainstream Islam such as masonry, theosophy, and Black nationalism. The second trend is to adopt mainstream Islam while coloring it with African American aspirations and culture. Syncretic Muslim groups included the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and, in more recent times, the Five Percenters. Historically mainstream African American Muslims in this early period included many mosques and mosque-based groups such as Wali Akram in Cleveland, who established the First Cleveland Mosque in 1937, that had an association of mosques in the Mid-West; and Muhammad Ezaldeen, who founded Addeynu Allahe Universal Arabic Association, that had at its height about nine “mosques” under its umbrella (Turner, 2003).

One of the main points of this article is that both of these trends among African American Muslims—syncretic and mainstream—shared from the beginning a similar approach in understanding the purpose of their places of worship. Islam for both was a vehicle for uplifting an oppressed people by means of emphasizing individual morality, clean-living, self-help manifest in economic empowerment, speaking out against racism, and standing up for justice. Both trends embraced the idea of inviting Black people to join with them in building a new collective existence that would overcome the barriers of racism and oppression. Philanthropy among African American Muslims has, therefore, centered on a cause, aimed at uplifting the individual and building a community, and thereby enabling a resistance to the injustice and oppression that African Americans suffer in America (Curtis, 2002).

African American mosques historically have served as a catalyst for entrepreneurship, which was encased in their advocacy for self-help and self-determination. These entrepreneurship efforts focused on developing mosque-run businesses and encouraging members to go into business for themselves. The goal of these entrepreneurial efforts was to provide jobs for Black people and to bolster the Black economy. Philanthropy entailed donating money to initiate Black businesses, providing expertise, volunteering at the businesses, and patronizing them.

The Nation of Islam was the most prominent example of initiating businesses. C. Eric Lincoln stated, “... in practically every city with a temple, they have restaurants, barber shops, clothing stores and occasionally other businesses (1961, p. 93). At one point, the Nation imported large quantities of fish from Peru that were retailed locally, providing income for the Nation and jobs for the local sellers.

Mainstream African American Muslims trod the same path. Imam Wali Akram in the 1930s envisioned his Muslim Ten Year Plan, which entailed an investment club to start businesses and eventually establish a village (Danin, 2002, pp. 108–112). One member of the Muslim Ten Year Plan observed, “The Muslim Ten Year Plan was a good viable plan to help those who have been disenfranchised and did not have economic strength. It was a way that we could form a commune and buy wholesale and bulk, and sell these items back to ourselves, and realize the profit in our community” (Danin, 2002, p. 111). The Islamic Party in the 1980s in Washington, DC, established numerous businesses, including a thriving taxi company. Imam W. Deen Mohammed (son of Elijah Muhammad) consistently worked to establish a national collective buying effort that would facilitate the establishment of local businesses. In the 1980s he initiated AAMCOP; in the 1990s he started the Collective Purchasing Conference (CPC); and in the 2000s he started New Africa, which continues to operate today.

All of these efforts were founded on the mantra of “do for self.” African American Muslims envisioned independent communities that did not rely on the White economic structure for survival. Controlling a geographic space that was reflective of the righteousness of Islam and dedicated to Black empowerment has always been an ideal of African American mosques.

The early wave of African converts in the 1920s and 1930s worked to establish their space as villages or a nation. The Nation of Islam hoped to establish a separate Black nation in America. Almost all of the other organizations hoped to establish villages in rural areas. The Moorish Science Temple established a “village” in New Jersey, Muhammad Eزالdeen established two “villages” in New York state near Buffalo (Danin, 2002, pp. 124–125) and one in southern New Jersey, and Wali Akram worked to establish a rural village in Ohio.

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the second wave of conversions, some African American mosques continued to work to establish a “village” but most focused their energy on purifying their immediate neighborhood by eliminating drug trafficking and prostitution. For African American Muslims, it was a contradiction of their vision of Islam to have a mosque in a neighborhood infested with crime (S. Muhammad, personal communication, March 15, 2020). This was especially critical during the crack epidemic in the 1980s. For example, Imam Siraj Wahhaj and his Masjid al-Taqlwa, located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, successfully fought to eliminate all the crack houses in the blocks around his mosque (see Siraj Wahhaj, n.d.). The author experienced this drive of African American mosques to purify their neighborhoods many times, the latest in 2004 in Lexington, KY. When drug dealers moved back into the neighborhood after being pushed out by the mosque in the 1980s, the mosque responded. A team was organized to confront drug dealers on the street, politely but sternly telling

them that they would not be allowed to sell drugs around the mosque. The leader of the drug dealers had a great deal of respect for Muslims due to his encounter with them in the prison system, and he agreed to move his operation.

Many African Americans converted to Islam because they felt that the Black church and Christianity in general had failed them. From their perspective, the Black church should have been out front in fighting racism and in promoting Black empowerment; instead, they felt that it was either focusing on the Hereafter or intent on imitating White people. African American Muslims have always wanted a faith, moral code, and identity that was not based in a Eurocentric framework—they wanted an alternative to a White mindset and power structure, which was the source of their oppression. They found that alternative in Islam (Wilmore, 1972).

The high level of commitment and fervor of African American Muslims in the 1920s–1940s and the renewal of African American aspirations in the 1960s–1970s has declined in the last few decades, but the foundational vision of uplift of an oppressed people, economic empowerment, self-help, and social justice has not disappeared. By the 2000s, the harsh rhetoric had cooled down, the dreams of establishing a self-governing community have dissipated (there still exist efforts such as New Medina in Mississippi), and the push to establish mosque-based businesses no longer occupies center stage in their aspirations (Bagby, 2002). Nevertheless, the aspiration to be a force for good in the Black community still inspires African American mosques.

The decline of commitment and fervor, which started in the 1980s, impacted all African American organizations and mosques. The Nation of Islam, resurrected by Minister Farrakhan, never regained its old glory. Imam W. Deen Mohammed, who transformed the old Nation of Islam into a mainstream Muslim organization, also was unable to repeat its past economic successes. And the passing of Imam Mohammed in 2008 was a major setback to ongoing efforts to revive his mainstream Muslim community. Imam Wali Akram dropped the 10 Year Plan in the 1980s. The Islamic Party fell apart after its move in the 1980s to the Caribbean to pursue the goal of establishing an Islamic nation on one of the islands. Muhammad Ezzaldeen's two villages declined starting in the 1980s and finally disappeared in the 2000s.

Nevertheless, numerous national efforts continue to endeavor to fulfill the long-standing vision of a strong movement of African American Muslims. The Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA) is seeking to unite all African American Muslims to pursue an indigenous agenda. Cultural organizations such as Sapelo Square strive to promote African American Muslim history and culture.

Although a strong national organization and charismatic leadership has yet to emerge, local mosques have retained the age-old sense of purpose of African

American Muslims. African American mosques still strive to impact their community, uplift African Americans, and promote self-determination.

Muslim Concepts of Charity

While the philanthropic motivation to uplift and empower Black people is central to African American Muslim giving, it would be a mistake to ignore the religious impulses that underlie African American Muslim philanthropy. In fact, it is best to view African American Muslim philanthropy as both a response to a long history of oppression and also a response to God to share one's wealth in His cause (S. Muhammad, personal communication, March 15, 2020). This section will explore that religious impulse and the Islamic practices of charity.

The concept and practice of charitable giving is a core value and an obligatory act in Islam. The two main Qur'anic words for charitable giving are *zakah* and *sadaqah*. In much of the Qur'an, the two words are synonymous but in the era of classical Islamic civilization the two became distinct.

The literal meaning of the word *zakah* is purification, and thus the purpose of *zakah* is to purify one's wealth. Islam teaches that all wealth is a gift from God and therefore if that gift is to be pure, it must be shared with others. Over time, *zakah* became a technical term referring to the obligatory money or goods that a Muslim must give annually based on a set formula. *Zakah* is explicitly monetary and is only required for those who possess a certain amount of wealth—thus it is not due from every Muslim.

Like *zakah*, *sadaqah* does not literally mean giving but derives from the root word meaning truthfulness or sincerity. Thus giving is viewed as a manifestation of being true to God by sharing His gifts. *Sadaqah* has come to refer to all manner of charitable giving, whether monetary, service, or even good behavior to others. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Each person's every joint must perform *sadaqah* (charity) every day the sun comes up: to act justly between two people is *sadaqah*...a good word is *sadaqah*" (An-Nawawi, n.d., p. 66). The two words together encompass the newer understanding of philanthropy as not only monetary gifts but also gifts of service.

In the first era of African American converts, 1920s–1950s, and even into the early years of second wave in the 1960s, neither term was used extensively. For the Nation of Islam, the call to give was a call to build a nation, a call to give in order to build something for "yourself." Giving in general was not tied to helping individuals directly, but rather to finance projects and businesses that would in turn uplift individuals and the Black community (W. Muhammad, personal communication, February 18, 2021).

In historically mainstream African American Muslim organizations, the call to give was similar—to give to finance and support a cause, not primarily to give to provide handouts to individuals. Appeals to give and volunteer among mainstream African Americans were more commonly framed not by quotes from the Qur'an about zakah or sadaqah, but by quotes about striving in the path of God, such as: “Strive in the path of God with your wealth and your lives” (9:41). Among mainstream African American Muslims in the period after the 1960s, appeals to give also included the concept of giving as a means to enter Paradise. In Islamic theology, a life of good deeds and sincere belief makes one eligible for God's grace and His blessing of Paradise. Sacrificing wealth and efforts for God's cause are some of the greatest of good deeds. One imam commented that his oft-repeated appeal is that your giving is “your investment for the Hereafter” (N. Ali, personal communication, March 15, 2020).

When the historically mainstream African American Muslim community became more aware of Islamic terminology and when the Nation of Islam transformed into a mainstream Muslims community under Imam W. Deen Mohammed in the 1970s and 1980s, the terms zakah and sadaqah came into usage. However, since few African American members were required to pay zakah due to their low levels of income, the term used in making appeals for charity was usually sadaqah—the broader term for giving (S. Muhammad, personal communication, March 15, 2020).

As the fervor of the 1960s and 1970s dissipated and sacrifice for the organization declined, the message of “do for self” and “strive in the path of God” was expanded to include a focus on the individual and family. As one imam from the association of Imam W. Deen Mohammed said, “instead of giving your rent money to the Nation, now the message included, charity begins at home” (S. Muhammad, personal communication, March 15, 2020). Uplift of a people was balanced by a message of uplift of self and family. This particular message is supported by the Qur'an and sayings of Muhammad, which actually prioritize giving to your family and relatives.

In both communities the ideals of giving and striving for a cause included a high expectation for members to volunteer and give of their skills, time, and energy. Volunteerism has been the backbone of the work of African American mosques. The emphasis on sadaqah with its appeal to all forms of giving, as opposed to zakah, meant that African American mosques saw charitable giving as a means to building organizational capacity and initiating projects for community development and social justice. As pointed out by Fauzia (2010), the traditional view of zakah is that money should go to the immediate needs of individuals, not as a funding source for projects to address social ills. The popular view among many immigrant mosque leaders in American is that zakah is restricted to helping

needy individuals, while African American mosque leaders view charitable giving as more open-ended.

African American Mosques in 2020

To investigate what is occurring presently in African American Muslim philanthropy, this paper will turn to insights derived from the US Mosque Survey 2020, which was a comprehensive study of all American mosques.¹ The Mosque Survey demonstrates that African American mosques continue to hold high the ideal of sadaqah—giving of wealth and life in the cause of God to serve the needs of people. In the US Mosque Survey 2020, mosques were asked about their activities, services, and finances. The 360 African American mosques demonstrated a high level of involvement in their local community, coupled with modest budgets.

Community Service Activities

American mosques in the survey were asked if they had organized the following activities within the past 12 months: (1) distributed zakah or sadaqah to local individuals or families, (2) operated a food pantry or food distribution program, (3) were involved in social justice activities or advocacy groups, (4) participated in an interfaith community service program, (5) were involved in their local community, or (6) organized a health education program or health fair. The responses to this set of questions demonstrated that African American mosques are highly invested in community service activities. In what follows, the responses of African American mosques are compared to immigrant mosques and all US congregations.²

¹The US Mosque Survey 2020 was a survey of 470 mosque leaders with a margin of error of +/- 5%. The survey was completed in August 2020. All statistics from the US Mosque Survey 2020 are taken from survey reports or from its database.

²Statistics for all US congregations are taken from the FACT study of 2020: FACT 2020 Survey Results | Faith Communities Today. Statistics for African American and immigrant mosques are taken from the data base of the 2020 US Mosque Survey.

Community Service Activities (Percentage of mosques that engage the following activities)			
Activity	African American Mosques	Immigrant Mosques	All US Congregations
Zakah or sadaqah distribution	95%	92%	
Food pantry or food Distribution	78%	65%	
Social justice activities	64%	47%	30%
Interfaith community service project	64%	59%	15%
Involved in local community (strongly agree)	58%	42%	30%
Health educational program or fair	50%	40%	

Table 1: Community service activities of African American, immigrant, and US mosques. Data from 2020 US Mosque Survey and FACT 2020 Survey Results | Faith Communities Today.

Zakah or Sadaqah Distribution

Virtually all mosques in America are involved in collecting and distributing charity (zakah/sadaqah) to needy individuals and families. As shown in Table 1 above, 95% of African American mosques and 92% of immigrant mosques were involved in zakah or sadaqah distribution.

Food Pantry

The majority of African American mosques have a food pantry or food distribution program. A typical example is Masjid al-Mumineen in Indianapolis, which has a food pantry open to the general community once a week. They also serve hot meals on that day. During the COVID-19 crisis, as needs grew, their

mosque was open multiple days a week and served hundreds of people in the community (I. Abdul-Aleem, personal communication, February 22, 2021).

Social Justice Activities

Almost two-thirds of African American mosques are involved in some type of social justice activity. In many cases, the public outcry against police brutality and systematic racism was an arena in which African American mosques were engaged—joining and in some cases leading marches. The Islah Center, which is part of Ibadullah Mosque in Los Angeles, organized a march through the Inglewood neighborhood in Los Angeles, hosting a wide variety of community groups (J. Saadiq, personal communication, February 23, 2021).

Involved in the Local Community

Mosques, as part of the 2020 US Mosque Survey, were asked if they are involved in their local community, and 58% of African Americans strongly agreed that they are heavily involved. An example is the Fifth Ward Islamic Center for Human Development, a small mosque in Houston, which describes itself as a religious and social center. Activities at the mosque in 2020 included an anger management class, an addiction support group, a workshop on “know your rights,” a community Malcolm X Day celebration, a program honoring Breonna Taylor, a program supporting small Muslim-owned businesses, and a weekly food distribution program (see the mosque’s website, *5thwic.org*).

Health Education

Exactly half of African American mosques organize some type of health education program. A prime example is the Huda Clinic, which grew out of the Muslim Center in Detroit. Once located inside the Muslim Center and now located across the street, the Huda Clinic is a free medical center, offering a wide variety of medical services and educational programs to the community (see *hudaclinic.org*).

The survey did not ask questions about the entrepreneurial activities of the mosques. So, while the statistics in Table 1 show that African American mosques are highly involved in social service-type activities in their local community, it is not clear whether they continue the tradition of starting and encouraging business ventures. Further research in these areas is needed.

African American Mosque Finances

The income of African American mosques is modest. The average amount of total contributions is \$74,347, which includes \$56,756 collected for mosque expenses and \$17,591 collected for zakah/sadaqah. The zakah/sadaqah income is 24% of the total contributions. In immigrant mosques, the zakah fund is 8% of total contributions, which demonstrates that African Americans place a priority on zakah/sadaqah.

Income for Mosques and US Congregations			
	African American Mosques	Immigrant Mosques	US Congregations
Mosque expenses	\$56,756	\$315,216	
Zakah/Sadaqah	\$17,591	\$46,587	
Total	\$74,591	\$361,803	\$449,051

Table 2: Income for mosques and US congregations. Data from 2020 US Mosque Survey and FACT 2020 Survey Results | Faith Communities Today.

As shown in Table 2, the income of African American mosques (\$74,591) is significantly lower than immigrant mosques (\$361,803), and even more so when compared to other US congregations (\$449,051). These figures are an increase from the 2010 income for mosque expenses (the question of zakah/sadaqah income was not asked in 2010). In 2010, African American mosque income for mosque expenses was \$46,746. Thus the 2020 mosque income shows a 21% increase.

Due to the relatively low income of African American mosques, few have paid staff—only 20% have a full-time paid staff, and the one full-time staff person in almost all of these mosques is the imam (pastor). Thus, African American mosques provide their numerous services through volunteers.

The average amount African American mosque attendees gave was \$453, which was calculated by dividing the total amount collected for mosque expenses and zakah/sadaqah (\$74,347) by the average Jum'ah attendance (164). However, in immigrant mosques the average was \$808. The figure was significantly higher among all US congregations: \$1,887. The low giving rate of African American

mosques—and for that matter, the low rate in immigrant mosques—is a question that begs for an answer. Is the low rate simply a function of low income or are there other factors at play? More research is needed.

Taking into account the low budgets of African American mosques and, conversely, their high level of activity, the clear conclusion is that African American Muslims extend their philanthropic efforts largely in volunteer service. The same conclusion can be deduced in looking at the low percentage of paid staff (only 20% have any paid staff); mosque activity is organized and implemented by volunteers.

Conclusion

African American mosques have a long history of striving to uplift and empower the African American community. The philanthropy of African American Muslims toward their mosques has entailed monetary gifts, but even more, their giving is expressed as giving of their time, energy, and expertise, which is expressed by the term sadaqah. African American mosques in 2020 have maintained that tradition by focusing on community services in particular.

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