

**Muslims in America:  
Race, Politics, and Community Building**

*Mbaye Lo*

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To date, most of the literature on Muslims in the United States has discussed the formation and growth of this population from a national perspective. Few studies, however, examine the dynamics of specific Muslim communities from a local, city-specific context. Mbaye Lo attempts to fill this gap through his research on the history of Muslims in Cleveland, Ohio, in his book *Muslims in America: Race, Politics, and Community Building*. This book aims to present a “comprehensive historical assessment of Muslim communities in Cleveland” by providing a detailed examination of “their history, their faith and the challenges they face as they establish mosques, develop Islamic centers, and create a multiethnic community” (p. 2). Using

various sources of data, such as oral histories of influential figures in the Cleveland area and local and national surveys conducted on Muslims in the United States, Lo discovers that “the history of Islam in Cleveland is a local phenomenon with both national and global derivations” (p. 3).

American immigration policies, the civil rights movement, and new interpretations of Islam are some of the factors that affected the growth of Muslim populations throughout the nation and in Cleveland. Lo traces the genesis of the Muslim community to Ahmadi missionaries who arrived in the city from India in the early 1900s. Shortly after their arrival, Ahmadis found great success in inviting African Americans to convert to Islam, creating the foundation for what was to become a burgeoning Muslim community. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the arrival of immigrant Muslims and members of the Nation of Islam to Cleveland helped the community expand, while also introducing new versions of Islam to the city’s resident Muslims. Ironically, this influx of Muslim outsiders to Cleveland resulted in both the growth and the division of its Muslim population.

Some of the most interesting sections in Lo’s book include excerpts from the speeches and diaries of influential individuals who affected both the national and local development of Islam in the country and in Cleveland. For example, Lo shares a quote from a famous speech given by Malcolm X in Cleveland in April 1964, entitled “The Ballot or the Bullet.” During this speech, Malcolm X discussed two characteristics that Lo feels were essential elements in the formation of African-American Muslim communities: political activism and black nationalism. In addition to Malcolm X’s speech, Lo also quotes from the diary of Imam Wali Akram, who was reportedly “the second American citizen to have completed the pilgrimage [Hajj] to the Holy Land [Mecca, Saudi Arabia]” (p. 66). Lo identifies Akram as one of the first African-American converts in Cleveland and the first convert in the city to lead a mosque. Similar to his discussion of Malcolm X, Lo draws a clear link between Akram’s significance to the history of Muslims in the United States to his more direct importance to Muslims in Cleveland, proving his earlier assertion that “the history of Islam in Cleveland is a local phenomenon with both national and global derivations” (p. 3).

In addition to speeches, diaries, and other sources of qualitative information, chapter 6 contains a survey that Lo used in his research. He states that this survey was developed and distributed to 500 Muslims in Cleveland in order to “answer questions that would otherwise remain unanswerable” (p. 2), such as current trends in Cleveland’s present-day Muslim population. In a brief description of the methods he used, the author relates that

the survey was distributed through area mosques during Friday prayers, the Cleveland Community Islamic School, the Muslim Student Association of a local university, stores selling Muslim products, and friends and students who tried to reach less observant Muslims (p. 113). The survey includes 17 questions about the participants' ethnicity, gender, educational and religious backgrounds, and religious affiliation. In his discussion of the survey, Lo explains each of the analytical units used and supplements his discussion with charts and graphs depicting the survey results.

While survey information always has the potential to complement historical and qualitative data, the design and analysis of Lo's survey are problematic. Of prime concern is the absence of a discussion on the survey results' possible limitations. For example, although he finds that only "one-third of the respondents were female while two-thirds were male" (p. 119), he does not discuss the possible causes of the resulting outcome (e.g., his method of survey distribution) or its effects (e.g., skewed findings). Additionally, not all of the charts and graphs are adequately labeled. For instance, a line graph on page 125 does not include any units of measure on the vertical axis, making it difficult, if not impossible, to understand. Finally, although Lo identifies Ahmadi and Nation of Islam Muslims (two groups often positioned outside of Islamic orthodoxy) as having a large impact on the development of Cleveland's Muslim community in the earlier portion of his book, he provides no explanation for the survey's exclusively "orthodox Muslim" (p. 117) sample in this chapter.

The language, structure, and focus of *Muslims in America* appear to speak to a general readership. For most readers, the basic introduction to Islam and Muslims and the insights into the politics of community building will be the most informative aspects of this book. However, the book's title misleads readers into believing that it also includes an extended discussion about Muslims in the broader American context, when, in fact, such discussions are limited.

More significantly, with no references to important female figures who actively participated in the development of Cleveland's Muslim community, Lo's historical account is incomplete and risks inaccuracy. Lastly, the numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes are a distraction. With a little extra editorial care and a more reflective scholarly practice, this book could have been all the more enriching.

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