

**An Imagined Geography:
Sierra Leonean Muslims in America**

JoAnn D'Alisera

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 181 pages.

The civil war in Sierra Leone broke out just as JoAnn D'Alisera arrived with the intention of studying a rural Islamic community. Instead, she eventually decided to study Sierra Leonean Muslims in Washington, DC. Based on her ethnographic research, *An Imagined Geography* is a sensitive depiction of immigrants who must negotiate their accommodation and allegiance to three separate imagined loci: the United States, in which they live; their Sierra Leonean homeland; and the ummah, the global Islamic community of which they are a part.

Much of the book centers on the experiences of five individuals, two men and three women, through whose eyes the author explores the tensions involved in being Muslim and African in the United States. Such a close-grained focus allows her to provide a very visceral depiction of how they live out their religious commitments in their everyday interactions with each other, with other Sierra Leoneans, and with Anglo-Americans. The men, for instance, are particularly apt to choose driving taxis as a career,

even though some of them are highly educated and qualified for more prestigious and more remunerative jobs. However, their taxis allow them to construct a religious space that they can decorate with Islamic paraphernalia or keep a supply of religious pamphlets to hand out to interested passengers, and to align themselves with religious time so that they can take prayer breaks and even drive to the mosque to pray. The many women-run hotdog stands provide women with a similar freedom, if admittedly less mobility.

D'Alisera provides a particularly sensitive and nuanced treatment of gender differences and how men and women – indeed, husbands and wives – understand and practice Islam. For example, Ahmadu is a strict and authoritarian husband and father who pays meticulous attention to prayer, while his wife Khadi, who does not always pray regularly (to her husband's dismay), is far more concerned with maintaining Islamic values than with punctilious attention to ritual detail. Sadatu, a former fashion model who married Mustafa before (in his own words) he became a “born again Muslim,” tries but does not always succeed in living up to her husband's newly found religious expectations. Aminata, whose husband is away, prays regularly but takes a lover, whom she nonetheless diligently admonishes to worship properly.

If the book's strength is the telling depth to which the author can describe the very personal (even intimate) experiences of particular Sierra Leonean Muslims, its corresponding weakness is the very non-random nature of her sample. All five individuals are closely affiliated with the Islamic Center of Washington, DC, a large multi-ethnic institution that dispenses religious instruction in English and provides a central place of worship. The director and imam is a Saudi, and much of the staff is Saudi-trained. Consequently, the center embodies a specific style, if not an ideological bent, of Islamic practice. In addition, it is by no means certain that the religious experience of these five Sierra Leoneans is typical of all of their coreligionist compatriots in Washington, DC, much less the United States.

Even so, D'Alisera proposes at the book's outset that “a universal religion is being transformed on American soil by a multiplicity of Muslim communities, such that a distinctly ‘American’ Islam is emerging (p. 9).” Unfortunately, she never spells out quite what she means by “American Islam,” although it would seem that this involves worshipping together with Muslims of various national backgrounds, having access to Islamic knowledge in English (or some other vernacular) rather than classical Arabic, and critiquing Islamic practices associated with the “homeland.” While some Sierra Leoneans may associate such ideas and practices with their renewed commitment to Islam on American soil, there is little that is specifically

American about them, and they certainly have their equivalents in Europe, Africa, and throughout the Muslim world.

Indeed, those parts that do not delve into her five key informants' lives suggest that Washington's Sierra Leonean community is far more divided over how individuals reconcile their allegiances to Islam and to their homeland. For example, she describes a naming ceremony presided over by two Sierra Leonean imams, one educated in Saudi Arabia and the other in Sierra Leone. The first makes a point of addressing the audience in English, the second in Krio, a language that distinctly marks the ceremony as Sierra Leonean. She also discusses in some detail the Fullah Islamic School established in a Maryland suburb, originally founded exclusively for Sierra Leoneans of Fula ethnicity but quickly opened to compatriots of all ethnic backgrounds. Clearly, the members of the school community are far less committed to an "American" Islam, if indeed such a thing exists, than D'Alisera suggests. Moreover, in the adult class, members hotly contest the designation of certain Islamic practices in Sierra Leone as ignorant or backward.

Ultimately, *An Imagined Geography* raises more questions than it answers about the experiences of Sierra Leonean Muslims in Washington, DC. Clearly, the lives of the five individuals associated with the Islamic Center do not come close to exhausting the range of opinions and practices in the community at large. Moreover, we do not learn enough about the community's contours to put them into perspective, not least the extent and nature of the interaction between Sierra Leonean Muslims and their compatriots who adhere to other religions. The extensive abstract theorizing that characterizes the beginning of the book does not correspond neatly with all of the ethnography, and particularly the final chapter. This is a tantalizing and sensitively drawn portrait that leaves us wanting to know more.

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