

Chapter 12

Nigerian Muslims in the United States: Challenges and Contributions to Nation–Building

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ABSTRACT

Nigerian Muslims in the United States face a myriad challenges that include how to construct and maintain their Islamic identity and practice their religion in the face of widespread Islamophobia in the various communities where they live and even in their workplaces. Another challenge is about parenting in an environment that is predominantly Christian. This chapter explores some of the issues encountered by members of the Nigerian Muslim diaspora population in the US. It also attempts to showcase some of the sterling achievements of some of their members, from prominent athletes to people who have left indelible footprints on the academy and philanthropic activities in their adopted homeland.

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INTRODUCTION

Discourses about Islam and diaspora migrations in the Western literature tend to focus on the Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrant experiences. African and especially West African Muslims' presence and experience in the West are often overlooked. However, in today's postcolonial West Africa, the classic patterns of migration, from the former colonies to the former Metropoles, are currently being altered. The prominence of North America, especially the United States, on the international stage has helped to promote the region as a new destination of choice for immigrants from West Africa. This reality is largely true because the former European colonialists have been struck by protracted crises and downturn in their respective economies. The migratory experiences of West African Muslims in North America in general, and the United States in particular, shape up differently from those of former colonial powers such as France and Britain. Religion in general and Islam in particular, is a now major unifying factor among West African immigrants in the United States (Mbengue, 2008).

This chapter examines the role and contributions of Nigerian Muslims in the diaspora to the development of their country of residence, the United States of America, and their ancestral homeland. Their contributions appear to have been sidelined, partly as a consequence the war on terrorism which President George Bush's administration launched after September 11, 2001. Immediately after that tragic, terrorist attack, which claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 victims the United States launched a campaign against what was then called Islamic fundamentalists. Unfortunately, in the hysteria that followed the terrorist attack, this term was loosely and perfunctorily applied to all who professed the Islamic religion in the USA. They were characterized and portrayed as "others" on the basis of their religion and associated traditions differing greatly from the Western Judeo-Christian cultures.

The American government perhaps unwittingly created an environment in which most Muslims, especially foreigners and irrespective of their immigration status, were widely perceived as aliens who should go back to their respective countries. Thus, the notion of Islamophobia gained currency continued to spread, notwithstanding the particular political ideology of the government in power in the country. Consequently, after the September 11, 2001, many Muslims found themselves the objects of suspicion, harassment and discrimination. As a result of several misinformed messages and narratives which many Americans repeatedly learned from the media, many of them began to view Islam as a monolithic religion that is intrinsically opposed to the West.

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