

# N O R T H C A R O L I N A C O N V E R S A T I O N S

## ROAD SCHOLARS

### The Mu'azzin's Song:

### Islam and the African Diaspora of the Indian Ocean

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Among my earliest memories as a child living in North Africa during the mid-1970s was listening to the *azān*, the melodic call to prayer heard daily across much of the Muslim world. Each morning, just before sunrise, I would hear the "song" as it gently filtered through my dreams. In the distance, the *mu'azzin* — the person making the call — would slowly fill the morning air with the opening words, *Allah-u-akbar* (God is great), stretching and then soulfully bending each vowel. Like a grain of sand, each rendition of the *azān* is slightly different from the next, each *mu'azzin* expressing his own unique sensibility.

For centuries the *mu'azzin* has affirmed and reaffirmed the unity and continuity of the *ummah*, the ever-growing, ever-changing community of Muslims comprising a kaleidoscope of cultures and societies — urban, rural, coastal, and everything in between (a subject I discuss as a Road Scholar in my lecture "The Many Faces of Islam"). Although the *azān* is delivered in Arabic, hints (inflections, emphases) of the *mu'azzin's* local or regional accent invariably come through:

Mande, Kiswahili, Gujarati, English, Malay, and others.

Until recently *mu'azzins* used only their voices to project their call — something akin to a tenor at the top of a crescendo. Today, however, many *azāns* — whether heard in Cairo, Hyderabad, Jakarta, or an enclave of London, Brooklyn, or Buenos Aires — are pre-recorded and amplified through speakers, losing their personal touch and more intimate character of times past.

The origin of the *azān* stretches back some fourteen hundred years to western Arabia. There, beginning with Islam's first *mu'azzin*, Bilal ibn Rabah — the son of an Ethiopian mother and an Arab father — the caller would invite the community to prayer. According to tradition, Bilal, who was a slave and a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammed, heard of the prophet's message of a single, compassionate, and merciful god, Allah, and refused to recant his newfound faith even when tortured by his owner who opposed the prophet's message. A close companion of Muhammed, Abu Bakr, heard of Bilal's tenacity and purchased the African

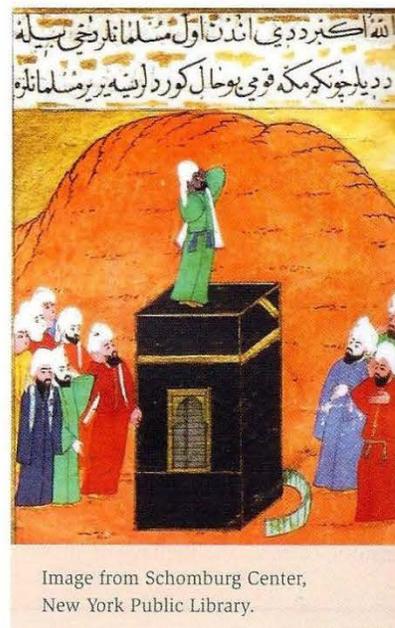


Image from Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

captive's freedom. Prompted by a dream, Muhammed then asked Bilal — known for his powerful yet melodic voice — if he would call the prayer for the community. Bilal agreed and soon emerged as a leader of the *ummah* — helping to carry out the takeover of Mecca and serving as inspiration for the *mu'azzin*-training brotherhood that would bear his name.

It is with Bilal that we see the beginnings of the intersection of Islam and the African Diaspora. Inextricably linked, Islam and the African Diaspora would spread and develop in tandem across the Indian Ocean world. Bilal's story would pass into legend and oral history, eventually recorded in the Hadith — stories of the early *ummah* which, along with the Qur'an (Koran), form the principal written sources of



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Islam, to which scholars have added histories, biographies, and legal and philosophical treatises.

When most of us think about Islam, we think of someone of Arab descent from the Middle East, yet three-quarters of Muslims are not from the Arab heartlands. Spread across sub-Saharan Africa (from West Africa across the Sahel and down the Swahili coast), South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia), the Far East (China), and to a lesser extent in Europe, the United States, and Latin America, Muslims comprise approximately 1.5 billion people — nearly one in four of the world's total population.

When most of us think about the African Diaspora, we think about black people in the Atlantic world — the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States. Beginning in the early 16th century, and over the next three hundred and fifty years, an estimated eleven million West, West-Central, and Southeastern Africans were forcibly migrated to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade. Less known is that an estimated twenty percent of the Africans taken to the Americas were Muslim.

However, a far older dispersion of Africans took place across the Indian Ocean, which has parallels to the Atlantic migration but also a number of significant differences. The African Diaspora of the Indian Ocean world began centuries before that of the Atlantic and likewise shaped the lives of tens of millions of people through contact, cultural influence, and the fruits of black labor. This other Diaspora, which grew with the spread of Islam, nevertheless remains the lesser known of the two major migratory trajectories of Africans in the world.

Sweeping across the Indian Ocean and its several seas were thousands of dhows — lateen-rigged ships — carrying Africans. Propelled by the seasonal winds that blow in clockwise fashion for four months, stop

for four months, and then reverse direction for another four, were the crews that made their way from port to port along the Indian Ocean littoral. Over the course of many centuries, such crews traded and spread goods, technologies, traditions, languages, and religion — specifically Islam, but also African-based religions which created new forms of syncretism (the fusion of religions, such as the practice of controlling the zar “winds,” or spirits, among Muslim Afro-Iranians; or paying homage to Sufi saints among Muslim Afro-Indians in the way that Hindus pay homage to their holy men and women). As part of their travels and settlement they created new coastal cultures and societies that mixed Africans with Arabs, Persians, and Indians — cosmopolitan cultures — in a great arc from the Swahili coast to the Malabar coast of western India.

Africans journeyed to distant lands, sometimes radically different from their own. Initially, most of these men and women came from the coastal areas of eastern Africa. Over time, more came from the interior Great Lakes region, followed by Central Africa. They took their customs, their skills, their arts, their music, their languages, and their worldviews with them wherever they went, Africanizing the Indian Ocean world along the way.

Like their counterparts in the Atlantic world, most African migrants across the Indian Ocean world were enslaved as captives of war, the victims of outright kidnapping, or made chattel as debt repayment. They were then sold, sometimes several times over. But not all Africans in the Indian Ocean world were captives, just as not all enslaved people were Africans. Unlike in the Americas, slavery in the Indian Ocean was never racially codified; people who were enslaved in the Middle East and Asia came from different backgrounds.

And there were other important differences between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean African Diasporas: historically,

Africans and their descendants in the Indian Ocean world tended to have greater social mobility than in the Atlantic world due to Islamic laws and societal conventions that incorporated the children of enslaved women into the homes of slaveholders as free kin while allowing (indeed, encouraging) greater authority among captives with specialized skills (for example, administrative and military); the Qur'an would provide explicit justification for emancipation.

There are many faces of Islam, just as there are many faces of humanity. While Islam has certain basic tenets (belief in a single god and compassion for others), there are infinite ways that it is interpreted and practiced (including rules and regulations that have more to do with social control than anything else). One cannot therefore meaningfully separate Islam (in some “pure” form) from interpretations of Islam, and its uses — which, as with other religions, run the gamut of practices (from the most generous and progressive acts of humanity to the most misogynistic and backwards). Indeed, there are many faces and many experiences of Islam.

For me, the *azān*, like the rising sun, remains an immeasurable source of comfort — an invitation into the seamlessness of history, where the past and present are inseparable, an audible reminder of my connection to all of life and all of what we create and recreate together.

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