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Black Muslims in Canada: A Systematic Review of Published and Unpublished Literature

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The Tessellate Institute is an independent charitable research institute that explores and documents the lived experiences of Muslims in Canada.

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About the Author

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Abstract

Black Muslims have a long history in Canada, but there has not been a consolidation of the published and unpublished information about these communities that can give a more nuanced understanding of these groups' lived experiences. To explore the scope and content of the available work about Black Muslims in Canada, a systematic review was done that focused on available published, unpublished, and grey literature. Thirty four (n=34) research papers, organizational reports, Masters and PhD theses, and government documents were retrieved through a systematized search of the literature and were included in this review. Most (94%, n=32) of the retrieved literature explored the experiences of 1st and 2nd generation Somalis in Canada, and the majority (94%, n=32) of the work on all Black Muslim groups in Canada used qualitative research methods. Across the literature, people's lived experiences were typically described as being mediated by being both Black and Muslim. Knowledge production about the lived experiences of Black Muslims who are not Somali, and which also includes quantitative methods, is needed in order to continue the documentation of the histories and contemporary contexts of Black Muslim communities across Canada.

Introduction

“... Black people have a long and enduring presence in this country and we need to ponder that. We really need to ponder that and think of that because one of the functions of racist discourse is to write Black people out of Canadian history and position us as newcomers; that we started to come after the Second World War and maybe even later... 1962, 1967 whenever... that our presence is a recent one and not a 400-year presence.” (Cooper, 2014)

The story of Black Muslims in Canada is as diverse as the groups that comprise the Black Canadian community, and it is fundamental to acknowledge that Black Muslim communities across the country are not a monolith. Rather, they are made up of people with links to the United States; islands in the Caribbean; countries across Central and South America; as well as West African, Southern African, Northern African, and Central African countries. Black Muslim communities contain numerous interfaith arrangements and cross-racial/ethnic/cultural/sectarian assemblages. Like other Black Canadians, Black Muslims in Canada have been deeply affected by local and global forces, including racism, discrimination, war, and colonialism.

In Canada, Black Muslims often experience erasure in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Mugabo, 2016), similar to the kind of racial erasure that Cooper (2014) describes in the passage above, and which affects Black communities regardless of their faith backgrounds. This erasure is particularly concerning when we consider the size of Black Muslim communities in Canada. According to the 2011 National Household Survey—the last time the long version was administered—Black Muslims comprised just under 9% of the total population of Muslims in Canada (“NHS Profile,” 2011). However, many of the issues affecting Black Muslim communities overlap religious and racial bounds, pointing to the intersectional experience of being both Black and Muslim in Canada—an experience that is deeply mediated by internal and external dynamics of power. To gain a better understanding of these phenomena, and of the lived experiences of Black Muslims in Canada, we conducted a systematic review of published, unpublished, and grey literature focusing on members of these communities.

Methodology

We used Arskey and O'Malley's (2005) scoping review framework to guide our systematic review. A scoping review is an approach to research that provides a "preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope" of a subject (Grant and Booth 2009, pp.101). Arskey and O'Malley's (2005) framework includes: 1. Identifying the research questions; 2. Identifying relevant studies; 3. Study selection; 4. Charting the data; 5. Collating, summarising and reporting the results.

Identifying the research questions

The research questions guiding this systematic review of the literature were:

1. What research has been conducted to date on the lived experiences of Black Muslims in Canada?
2. What are the research areas (both academic and non-academic) that have received attention?
3. What are the gaps (both academic and non-academic) or areas of research that have not received enough attention?
4. What do the findings reveal about the state of research conducted so far regarding the lived experiences of Black Muslims in Canada?

Identifying relevant studies

The search strategy for the electronic database were developed and conducted with the assistance of a librarian scientist at the University of Ottawa Library. Electronic databases that publish sociology and health-related information and research were accessed, including ProQuest, Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, MEDLINE, and PsycINFO.

Google Scholar was also searched for grey literature and additional research studies and reports on the topic. Grey literature included in this search consists of unpublished and published dissertations and theses, books, book chapters, and organizational reports.

The search headings used in all six electronic databases included: "black Canadian" OR "African Canadian" OR "Somali Canadian" OR "East African Canadian" OR "Afrolatin* Canadian" OR "Caribbean Canadian" OR "Afro Arab" OR "Black Arab" AND "Muslim" OR "Islam" AND "Canada" OR "Toronto" OR "Montreal" OR "Ottawa" OR "Edmonton" OR "Calgary" OR "Vancouver".

The inclusion criteria for the database searches were:

1. Reviews written in or translated to English;
2. Reviews published between 1990 and July 2018 (inclusive);
3. Grey literature including dissertations, theses, organizational reports, book chapters, and special journals;
4. As part of its primary objectives, the document or study focuses on Black Muslims in Canada in any capacity, including issues pertaining to their social context, political context, health, culture, religion/spirituality, and human rights;
5. 'Black Muslims' are defined as any group or individual who are of African descent, identify as Black, identify as Muslim, and, in this case, are living in Canada.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Magazine and newspaper articles.

Study selection

All retrieved studies¹ from electronic databases were assessed for relevance by reviewing the title and evaluating it against the inclusion criteria. When relevance could not be determined by reading the title alone, the full abstract was reviewed to make a relevance decision. We then reviewed the full abstract and text of the studies and documents.

Charting the data

¹ Zotero, a software reference package, was used to manage the citations.

Documents and studies were charted using Microsoft Excel software, and all information was extracted and contained in this document.

The following information was extracted from the documents and studies: date of data extraction, type of document/study, full reference, study/document aim/objective, topic(s) explored, Black Muslim group(s) focused on, methodology, main finding(s)/results, recommendation(s).

In all instances, a uniform approach was used to chart relevant documents and studies.

Collating, summarising, and reporting the results

To effectively summarize, collate, and report the results from the diverse body of work that was found on the research topic, the extracted data was entered into a table on Microsoft Excel where it underwent analysis. We also used matrices to compare the characteristics of the studies and documents.

Results

The electronic database search and Google Scholar search yielded 1073 documents. In the first exclusion phase, 6 duplicates were eliminated leaving 1067 documents. In the second exclusion phase, after a review of their titles, 987 documents were deemed ineligible and therefore eliminated, leaving 80 documents to undergo a relevance review. In the third exclusion phase, 49 documents failed to meet the inclusion criteria and were eliminated, leaving 31 documents eligible for the systematic review. Three documents from grey literature were also included in the final number of documents. In total, 34 documents were included in the systematic review (see Figure 1 for an overview of the search results).

Findings

The majority (94%, n=32) of the retrieved literature explores the experiences of 1st and 2nd generation Somalis in Canada (See Table 1 for an overview of the documents). This work highlights negative impacts of the immigration experience—such as family disintegration, systemic discrimination, and poverty—affecting Somalis who arrived in

Canada after being displaced by political strife and civil war in Somalia during the mid-1980's to the early 1990's (Mohamed, 2017). The research describes a continuum of violence that characterized people's refugee and immigration experiences to Canada, and which resulted in intergenerational trauma (Bokore, 2016b). Most of this work focuses on the stories of Somalis who arrived in cities like Toronto, Ottawa, and Edmonton, and who were confronted with a social system not designed to meet their needs. In fact, underlying themes across under half (41%, n=14) of the retrieved literature were integration, resettlement, and immigration experiences of Somali communities in Canada (Bokore, 2013; Bokore, 2016; Jibril, 2011; Kusow, 1998; Mohamed, 2017). Other themes explored included aging (Lagace, Charmarkeh, & Grandena, 2012), policing (Ellis, Lincoln, Abdi, Nimmons, Issa, & Decker, 2018), and schooling (Collet, 2007).

While the literature retrieved in this systematic review shows evidence of a growing knowledge base of Somali-focused and produced research, and shows some research interest in other East African Muslims, such as the Sudanese community (Makwarimba, Stewart, Simich, Makumbe, Shizha, & Anderson, 2013), the review also reveals a gap in the published literature on other Black Muslim groups in Canada. According to the last long-form National Household Survey, as of 2011, Somali people comprised almost half of the Black Muslim community in Canada ("NHS Profile," 2011). From this perspective, it makes sense that the majority of the literature would reflect the group's experiences. However, the Black Muslim community in Canada is diverse, and this gap in the literature indicates that other Black Muslim groups have not been adequately reflected in the scholarly work being produced on Black Muslims in Canada.

As in the case of the Somali community, research on other Black Muslim groups in Canada that was captured in our systematic review focused mainly on 1st and 2nd generation people with links to countries in Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean, and residing in major cities like Montreal and Toronto (Mendes, 2011; Mugabo, 2016b). This literature contributes an important nuance to the existing research base by centering contemporary explorations of Black Muslimness, accomplished through the exploration of topics such as self-identity formation and experiences of overlapping forms of discrimination (Mendes, 2011; Mugabo, 2016). The historical analyses these

papers provide are also notable, particularly those which historicize the presence of West African Muslims in Canada. These works critically assert that the first Black Muslims in Canada were forcibly brought to present-day Quebec and Ontario from West Africa as enslaved people, more than 300 years ago (Mugabo, 2016); such findings reflect similar research on the presence of African Muslims in the United States during the period of slavery (Diouf, 2013; Abdul Khabeer, 2018).

Most (94%, n=32) of the existing literature on Black Muslims in Canada used qualitative research methods to explore the lived experiences of people from these communities and to capture their perspectives. The qualitative research employed data collection techniques that emphasize the development of narratives and stories, such as case study (Mugabo, 2016), self-ethnography (Bokore, 2016b), and life-history (Mohamed, 2017). Choosing these data collection techniques also reflects the importance of oral history in Somali and other Black Muslim communities, and its use to transmit and retain cultures and ideas. A smaller percentage (6%, n=2) of the literature exclusively used quantitative research methods like surveys (Ungar, Hadfield, Amarasingam, Morgan, & Grossman, 2017; Taylor, Wohl, King, & Kawatra, 2012), and 12% (n=4) of the research and studies used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

That nearly a third (29%, n=10) of the research in this review was done as part of Masters and PhD thesis projects is a reflection of the emerging academic areas of Somali Studies and Black Canadian Muslim studies. It should also be noted that the majority (87.5%, n=7) of the graduate work on Somali research topics were conducted by members of the Somali community, which is likely an outcome of concerted efforts to self-produce knowledge about their communities (“The Somalidemic Manifesto,” 2015).

Across the literature, people’s lived experiences were typically described as being mediated by being both Black and Muslim. The work discussed the distinct ways in which Black Muslims are discriminated against within both white supremacist structures and Islamic cultural-religious spaces. Mugabo’s (2016b) term anti-Black Islamophobia provides a theoretical framework that amplifies the specific kinds of racism and discrimination experienced by Black Muslims and individuals who are

perceived to be Black and Muslim; it also describes how Black Muslims become erased from dominant narratives about Muslim identity by non-Black Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While it does not use the concept explicitly, Mendes' (2011) work describes what could be considered experiences of anti-Black Islamophobia amongst Black Muslim women, who discuss being marginalized in religious and secular spaces and encountering discrimination from non-Muslims for being both Black and Muslim, and from non-Black Muslims for being Black. Mugabo (2016b) historicizes this kind of Islamophobia in Canada by focusing on Black Muslims in Montreal in the 1990s. She highlights how the Quebec state and white racists created negative discourses about Black Muslims, while at the same time Black Muslim activists cultivated "spiritual spaces of community building and care" (p. 157). Mohamed's (2016) work on the activism of 1st generation Somali Canadian women also asserts that these women negotiated their Blackness and Muslim identities against fixed ideas being produced about what it meant to be a Somali in Canada.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review that focuses on the lived experiences of Black Muslims in Canada. The richness of the texts retrieved in our review indicate that a field of Black Muslim Studies in Canada is emerging, and the existing literature has the potential to revolutionize how we talk about these communities in a Canadian context. This systematic review should be regarded as a starting point, and we welcome replications and improvements on our research and methodology.

The findings of the systematic review also highlight the lack of published work on Black Muslims who are not Somali—an important research gap that needs to be addressed. At the same time, although the publications we recovered on these other groups were smaller in number when compared to the work produced by and about Somali communities, they make a critical interjection into the knowledge base by historicizing the presence of Black Muslims in Canada. Perhaps their most significant contribution is the connection made between colonialism and the presence of enslaved Africans in Canada, brought to the country to be exploited as a part of the Canadian

settler colonial project (which also systematically oppressed Indigenous communities). Historian Afua Cooper's (2006; 2007) work on slavery in Upper and Lower Canada (present-day Ontario and Quebec) dispels the myth that Canada—aside from being a safe haven for runaway slaves—did not participate in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Mugabo's (2016) work makes an important interjection into discourses that centre the early and mid-20th century immigration of Muslims from South and South East Asia and the Arab world and frame these communities as being in Canada longest. Mugabo (2016) shifts the narrative towards acknowledging that Muslim presence in Canada began with the arrival of enslaved African people in the context of colonialism. She connects historical evidence, such as late-17th-century baptismal records of enslaved Africans brought to Quebec from Muslim-majority West African countries (such as Guinea), and surmises that many of those enslaved were likely Muslim, and should therefore be considered the first Muslims to have come to Canada (Mugabo, 2016). This argument is further strengthened by the knowledge of formerly enslaved people like Mohamed Baquaqua, a man who was born in the 1820s into a Muslim family in Benin and was later sold into slavery in Brazil. Baquaqua eventually escaped to northeastern United States before relocating to Haiti (where he became Christian) and then to Canada (Turner, 2003). Such findings are also consistent with research in the United States, which has found that enslaved African people practiced Islam, but were forced to hide or abandon their faith in the New World (Diouf, 2013; Austin, 2011).

The literature on Black Muslims who are not Somali also provides a glimpse of different sects and activist movements—like the Nation of Islam—that Black Muslims were part of, in the 1990s, in cities like Montreal (Mugabo, 2016b). Nation of Islam's pro-Black message, focused on community empowerment, was popularized in the United States before migrating north, where it resonated with Black Canadians and added another layer to the Black Muslim experience in Canada (Mugabo, 2016b; McCloud, 2007). Further work is needed to adequately explore the different sects that Black Muslims in Canada may identify with outside of the current Sunni -dominant framework. Future research should include Black Muslims who identify as Shia, Ahmadiyya, and Ismaili, as well as those who identify with Black-centric sects like the

Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, the Five-Percent Nation, and the Nuwaubian Nation.

Perhaps most significantly, the availability of work on Somali Muslims and lack of published information on Black Muslims who are not Somali shows that although each is a part of very distinctive periods, they are also inherently connected. It also illustrates how global systems of domination such as colonialism and neoliberalism, which become mediated by processes like capitalism and war, have had some of the most disastrous implications on Black people historically and contemporarily, and in this case, Black Muslims.

Chase (2003) and Jackson and Naidoo (2012) highlight the significance of using qualitative methods like interviews to facilitate people—particularly Black people and people of colour—to tell their own stories. While qualitative research does not absolve its practitioners from issues of power, representation, and agency, the methodology does facilitate deeper analyses and descriptions of people’s lived experiences. The literature we reviewed that focused on Black Muslims who are not Somali exclusively used qualitative research methods and data collection techniques (such as archival research) which provided a historical analysis of Black Muslims in Canada (Mugabo, 2016b). We believe that the proliferation of these methods across the research indicates that this approach has been effective in capturing the lived experiences of Black Muslims in Canada thus far. Future work on Black communities who are not Somali may also benefit from using quantitative methods, as well as some of the data collection techniques used in the literature that comprises this review, to further address the current research gaps and document people’s distinct experiences of being Black and Muslim in Canada.

Future Research

The field of Black Muslim Studies in Canada is emerging and wide open. We encourage continued research production on Somali Muslims in Canada done by Somali people and communities; we also recommend, however, that more research be done to address the specific realities, experiences, and contexts of Black Muslims who are not Somali. We reiterate the importance of shifting the current Sunni-dominant lens that

frames most of the existing research and working to centre the experiences of Black members of diverse Muslim sects. We also encourage more quantitative research across all Black Muslim communities to complement and strengthen the existing qualitative research, and believe a further mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods could be relevant to deepen, extend, or complement analyses of the Black Muslim communities.

Limitations

We included as many search terms as possible to retrieve literature on diverse groups of Black Muslims in Canada (see Figure 1); however, we also acknowledge that there may be specific terms used to self-identify or describe groups of Black Muslims that we may have omitted, and which may have led to the omission of some eligible papers and documents.

Conclusion

The lack of literature on the lived experiences of Black Muslims who are not Somali indicates that there are ripe opportunities for primary research that would make this topic its focus. Qualitative methods and data collection techniques have been shown to be commonly used across the existing work, especially in the work done by Black Muslim researchers. Future work should consider using these methods, and mixing them with quantitative approaches to continue to build the knowledge base on Black Muslims in Canada. Anti-Black Islamophobia is a compelling theoretical framework to understand the distinct and intersecting ways in which Black Muslims are excluded from larger discourses about Islam and being Muslim in Canada. It also provides much-needed historical nuance to these discussions, affirming Black Muslim presence in Canada and this presence's origin in Canadian settler colonialism.

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