



---

[Member Note] Arabs and Muslims in the Caribbean

Author: Carlos Jair Martínez Albarracín

Source: *Latin America & Caribbean Islamic Studies Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 2021), pp. 15-20.

---

## Arabs and Muslims in the Caribbean

Carlos Jair Martínez Albarracín<sup>1</sup>

In good time we have the *Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies Newsletter*, which allows researchers and academics to share their research and views about the increasingly significant presence of Islam and Muslims in the region. This brief note establishes the distinction between Arab and Muslim communities that have formed throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.

### Introduction

This distinction is fundamental for the observance of these communities since one social actor can be Arab without being Muslim, can be Muslim without being Arab, or can be Arab and Muslim at the same time. When we talk about the studies of Islam in the Americas and in the Caribbean, we have to look to the past and refer to the colonial period in the so-called New World when Moros and Moriscos began to arrive from Spain, which was viewed with concern by the Spanish crown (see Dressendorfer 1971, Humber 1986, Cook 2016). Very important to note is that after Latin, the Arabic language has the highest lexical contributor in the so-called “Spanish” language spoken nowadays in Latin America and the Caribbean, influencing or contributing more than 4000 words to its lexicon. Also, African Muslims arrived through the Caribbean Sea both to the insular Caribbean, that is, to the islands, as well as to the continental Caribbean (in other words, the countries that have a coastline in the Caribbean Sea). This is masterfully described by Sylviane Diouf (1998, 344). Subsequently, the Arab diaspora originated from *bilād al shām* or the Greater Syria in 1880 and immigrated to North, Central and South America because of political and economic instability faced by the Ottoman Empire in the Arab Levant. This is detailed by the Turkish historian Kemal Karpat (1985, 175-209). This diaspora of *bilād al shām* made possible the formation of the first Arab communities (composed mainly of Maronite Christian speakers of Levantine Arabic), which later influenced the formation of Muslim communities in North, Central, South America and the Caribbean. Now, we will take a look at these two moments.

## The first moment

The first moment corresponds to the consolidation of the Arab communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. An extensive bibliography has been developed to date on the history of the presence and development of these Arab communities that covers all the countries of the region and that have been referred to as Arabs or Syrian-Lebanese or Palestinians. It is important to reiterate then that the Arab communities in Latin America and the Caribbean were mainly made up of Christians from *bilād al shām* that arrived in several waves from 1880 to the present. Being Arabic-speaking Christians, these first immigrants struggled to learn American Spanish, Portuguese, English or Creole from the islands and integrate. However, they did so in part because they shared the same belief system, that is, Christianity or Catholicism which established a fundamental closeness or similarity with the host societies. As the generations born in Latin America and the Caribbean lost the Arabic language, they began to acquire local dialect varieties, local names were adopted, and they even changed their surnames in order to integrate, assimilate and be successful participating in commerce, politics, arts and sciences in the host societies.

Once settled, they established marked differences among themselves, that is, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians handled integration dynamics differently. The cultural, gastronomic and even linguistic differences between these three groups became notable, since, for example, the dialect variety of Lebanese Arabic has some lexical elements from Aramaic, Syriac and Phoenician origin that the Syrian or Palestinian dialect varieties do not have. However, of course, they belong to the same dialect area and share similarities as well. Thus, the dynamics of integration of these three groups were different since the Syrians and Palestinians tended to fully assimilate, unlike the Lebanese who formed trading communities that saw themselves strengthened with the subsequent arrival of the Muslim Lebanese. They managed to maintain the use of the Lebanese language, which of course is a Semitic language with a high influence of Arabic given the historical process of Arabization of the Lebanese territory. In fact, these three groups currently handle different dynamics of seeing the past and building memory and even

manifest political affinities from a distance. We therefore see that Syrians, Palestinians and Lebanese make up a socioculturally diverse group within the broader group that we call “Arabs” and that they have had a presence in practically all the countries of the Americas and the Caribbean and have managed diverse dynamics of integration in the region.

### **The second moment**

The second moment corresponds to the formation of the Muslim communities, particularly after the 1970s and the migration of Muslim Levantine Arabs, mainly Lebanese who were welcomed by the Arab communities already settled in the region. Of course, previously there was a presence of pro-Islamic institutions and Islamic missions throughout the region, such as the Muslim Institute of Guadeloupe, founded in 1901, one of the oldest in the Caribbean. The role played by Muslim missions from India, especially in the Caribbean, is also fundamental in shaping contemporary Muslim communities in the region. However, starting in the 1970s, a process of mosque construction and the consolidation of Muslim communities has been developed throughout the Americas and Caribbean region, which continues to this day; in fact, the expansion of Islam in the insular Caribbean is very significant to the point that there is no island country in which there is not a mosque or at least a prayer center where Muslims can gather (see Martínez Albarracín 2019). The implications of the growth and consolidation of Muslim communities throughout the Caribbean constitutes a field of study for social scientists, humanists, and religion scholars as to what has transformed the linguistic, religious and cultural reality of the region. We must also take note of associations and missions from non-Arab countries such as India or Iran that have promoted, for example, the consolidation of the Shi’a Muslim community of Buenaventura in the Pacific region of Colombia.

Faced with this new social and cultural reality represented by the accelerated growth and expansion of Islam during the last 50 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is essential to support initiatives such as the *Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies Newsletter* because it allows bringing together different works, establishing contacts with researchers on Islam and

especially because it makes it possible to communicate to society – in the case of Arabs in particular – the history of a migratory process that has impacted the region’s sociocultural reality and that we must face within the framework of respect for the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity that characterizes the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean. We see, for example, how the body of beliefs of Islam has become part of the religious practices of some indigenous groups in Latin America such as the Muslim Chamulas of Chiapas in Mexico or among the Mapuches of Chile and the Wayuu in Colombia. Thus, we have a whole social and cultural reality in which to study the contacts, distances, neighborhoods and proximities that characterize the reality of the self and the other in contemporary society. Today we know more about these communities, we know about the diversity of Muslims (since there are Sunnis, Shi’a, Sufi or Druze) in linguistic situations of diglossia and bilingualism that configure dynamics of cultural alternation conditioning the construction of identity and memory.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, today Islam and Muslims are present throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. Muslims make up a community that has mosques that conform to the characteristics of Islamic architecture, designed for the activation of classical Arabic and the discourse of Islam. Secondly, there are non-Arab Muslim communities throughout the region made up of Islamic associations or missions from non-Arab countries such as India, Indonesia or Iran and of which non-Arab, Afro-descendant and indigenous populations are part. Thirdly, it is concluded that throughout the region and as a result of the diaspora coming from *bilād al sham*, there are Arab communities that to a large extent made possible the formation of Arab Muslim communities because they welcomed them and made use of them so as not to fully assimilate into the receiving societies. These Arab Muslim communities today maintain particular linguistic situations such as bilingualism and emerging Arabic diglossia with a solid commercial presence in countries such as Colombia, Panama and Brazil in the Triple Border area where there is also a presence of Muslim Arabs from Qatar.

Finally, today in the Americas and the Caribbean there is a presence of Muslim associations and missionaries from non-Arab countries such as India, Indonesia, Iran, among others; as well as the presence of Muslim institutions and missionaries from Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Qatar and others who find fertile ground for the growth of Islam in the region. This new reality configures new ways of constructing identity and memory, they are new guidelines for the orientation of value and they are also an opportunity to recognize ourselves, seeing in "otherness" the possibilities of tolerance and the recognition of the richness of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity that characterizes Latin America and the Caribbean.

## References

- Cook, Karoline P. (2016). *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dressendorfer, Peter (1971). *Islam unter der Inquisition: die Morisco-Prozesse in Toledo 1575-1610*. Harrassowitz; 1st Edition. 172 p.
- Diouf, Sylviane A. (1998) *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. NYU Press.
- Humber, John (1986). *Backgrounds and Preparations for the Roanoke Voyages, 1584-1590*. North Carolina Office of Archives and History Press.
- Karpat, Kemal (1985) "The Ottoman emigration to America". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17, no 2.
- Martínez Albarracín, Carlos (2019) "Orientalismo e identidad en el Caribe insular". *Revista Zero*. Universidad Externado de Colombia, v. 36, p.22-29.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup>BA/MA in Linguistics, Universidad Nacional de Colombia. He has developed contributions to the Colombian linguistic reality with his explorations on the usage of Arabic in Colombia and the Caribbean, his pioneering explorations on the sociolinguistic situation of the Arab and Muslim communities of Colombia and the Insular Caribbean have been published by *Revista Estudios de Dialectología Norteafricana y Andalusí* at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, 2006; at the Instituto Caro y Cuervo in Colombia, *El Lenguaje en Colombia: Realidad Lingüística de Colombia*, 2012 and other academic journals as *Ikala, Language and Culture Journal*, at Universidad de Antioquia, 2019. He has been an honorary member of the Linguistics Commission of the Colombian Academy of Language in 2012 and is currently a lecturer.