



[Interview] "Spotlight on Habeeb Akande: Illuminating the Blackness"

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Spotlight On Habeeb Akande: Illuminating the Blackness

Interview and Introduction by Rahma MacCarone

Ordem e Progresso. Order and Progress. Sewn into the national flag and ingrained in Brazil's political ideology, these two apparently majestic words reflect the long-standing political view Brazil adopted at the turn of the nineteenth century. The selective positivist mantra influenced many Latin American intellectuals but particularly Brazilian elites who sought to harness it as a force to reject the monarchy, the power of the church, and modernize Brazilian society. The inscription, however, leaves out perhaps the most significant part of the French philosopher Auguste Comte's (1798–1857) famous positivist dictum: “*Love as a principle* and order as the basis; progress as the goal.”¹ Brazil's elites desiring to move forward after the abolition of slavery in 1888 did not necessarily operate on the concept of “*Love as a principle*.”

While modernizing the country's infrastructure and adopting new technologies for economic expansion, the country simultaneously perpetuated the illusion of racial democracy, institutionally enacting discriminatory policies that continue to marginalize more than a hundred million Black Brazilians. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates in 2011, Abdias Nascimento, a prolific Black Brazilian activist, said that although Black Brazilians are, “[the] majority who built this country, [they] remain, up to this day, second class citizens.”² Why is this the case? What are the historical processes that created the socio-economic inequalities that many Black Brazilians still struggle to overcome? How has the myth of racial democracy played out in the everyday lives of Black Brazilians? To answer these questions, Habeeb Akande's forthcoming documentary, *Brazil City of Joy*, examines the histories of Black Brazilians and how policies of exclusion historically shaped preconceived notions about Afro-Brazilians, including Black Muslims and non-Muslims people.

¹ Emphasis added.

² Diene, Ricardo Pollack, Director. “Brazil: A Racial Paradise? Black in Latin America,” with Henry Louis Gates Jr. Black in Latin America, PBS.org, 4 May 2011, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america/>. Accessed 1 June 2022.

Largely based on his book, *Illuminating the Blackness: Black and African Muslims in Brazil* and inspired by his travels to Salvador, Brazil's third largest Black city, Akande's work seeks to dismantle stereotypes about Black Brazilian men and women by presenting a narrative that counteracts notions of Black inferiority. To do so, Akande revisits the history of enslaved Africans and in particular, Brazil's most notorious slave uprising, which took place in Bahia in 1835. Known as the Malê Revolt, a religious and racial revolt against slavery led by African Muslims, it continues to serve as an empowering form of liberation for many Black Brazilians living within a highly racist society. The book and documentary are invitations to learn about everyday Black Brazilians, their histories, their contributions to Brazilian society, and their significance in the world at large. The following interview touches on a range of topics that Akande covers. Ultimately, his work highlights the profound resilience and political activism of Black-Brazilians as demonstrated in the reimagined flag inscription showcased in 2019 by the Estação Primeira de Mangueira — one of the oldest and most revered Samba schools in Rio de Janeiro — during the Brazilian Carnival parade. It read: *índios, negros e pobres*, a definitive act of defiance and one driven, perhaps, by love.

It is impossible to talk about the documentary without first talking about your book *Illuminating the Blackness: Blacks and African Muslims in Brazil* and how these two projects are interrelated. Tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to this book project.

I am originally from Nigeria, born and bred in the UK, and obviously a Muslim as well and obviously being of Nigerian Yoruba descent, I was familiar with the Nigerian Muslims in Brazil because I went to a Saturday school before my teens and I have always been fascinated and interested about the contributions that Black Muslims – especially West African Muslims – have made in world history. Since a relatively young age, I always wanted to travel to Brazil and learn more about the Mâles and about the Yoruba people in Brazil, not only about the slave revolts, but also of the contribution that they've made to Brazilian society and whether their impact was still felt in contemporary Brazil. Before I first traveled to Brazil in 2014, I heard a lot about Candomblé and Yoruba traditional religions, and less about Muslims and the Yoruba Muslims or the Niger Muslims.

Initially, in February 2014, I went to Brazil for holiday and went to the carnival. Several people I spoke to in Rio asked me “Are you from Salvador?” in Bahia and I was like “No, why?” They told me my facial features were like a lot of the people in Salvador. I didn't take it as an insult or anything like that, because I knew that Salvador has the largest concentration of African descendants in Brazil and a large majority are descendants of Yoruba or the Nigerians from where my ancestors are from. So, I thought it might be good to visit Salvador.

I went to Salvador in September of the same year and read João José Reis' book, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*. It was a brilliant book and a lot of the work that I did in the documentary was based on and inspired by it. Reis is the only one that I came across that offers a story that really spoke about the Malê community at length. I wanted to write about the history, but also address the misrepresentations and misconceptions about Afro Brazilians. I came to see how the three main cities, Salvador, Rio, and São Paulo are very different and have very diverse clusters of culture that vary from city-to-city, particularly in El Salvador because of the history of the Muslim community. There, the way people dress, the food, the music they play and listen to is closely linked with West Africa.

One interesting topic that you explore in your book targets how this diversity impacts people of African descent. I am thinking about the issue of *colorism*. Can you tell us, how in your experience of traveling between Brazil and Nigeria you have observed colorism manifest in Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities?

That is something that, being a man, was a bit of a blind spot. Honestly, it did not really come to my attention until my third or fourth visit. I was very aware of the racism in Brazil, but the colorism, especially as it pertains to black women, did not really come to my consciousness until people in the city brought it to my attention and I started to try to see it and to notice it. For example, what would be a white Brazilian in Brazil, may not be white in the U.S. or the UK. I noticed that in conversations with Brazilians who have a darker skin tone, especially with women, they would speak about the differences in terms of how they were treated, how oftentimes the Black Brazilian woman is more sexualized and objectified as a form of entertainment, whereas the Black Brazilian men I spoke to, even those of a darker skin, colorism was not really an issue for them. Maybe because some of them, you could say, benefited from colorism in a sense.

Even the so called hyper-sexualization of the Black male is referred to as *Nigal*. For some men, this is a popular or nice term to use, even though some are fetishized. But from that came opportunities, whether it is in relationships or even job opportunities. Thus, for some of the men, they did not see colorism as an issue. There was a very big difference between how women view colorism compared to men. Even for Black people from abroad visiting Brazil, there was a difference in terms of the experience about colorism for both Black men and women.

What are some of the ways in which Black Brazilian Muslims and non-Muslims are fighting colorism and anti-Black racism?

During my stay in 2018, I noticed that more Black women were wearing their natural hair and embracing their curls and the way they looked. I visited stores that sold beauty products that encouraged women to be proud of their hair and skin. Also, hip hop music has been a big tool for Black Brazilian activism. Dr. Hisham D. Aidi wrote an excellent book on the history of hip hop as a global phenomenon titled, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*. He has a chapter on how, for many young people, hip hop in Brazil translates to Black power, particularly when it comes to claiming their Black *and* Muslim identifications. Hip hop created an awareness among youth, a consciousness about being Black and about being Black Muslims, which also helps provide resilience amid daily discrimination. I spoke to a couple of artists when I was in São Paulo, and they spoke of the importance of referencing the history of the Malê and the history of the Black Muslims in Brazil as well as Quilombo culture in their songs to educate people about their past and the power they have because of it. The beautiful thing about hip hop is that it reaches the masses very easily because it is such a popular genre. That makes it a relatively inexpensive way to get the message out to people about Black consciousness, learning about their ancestors and who they are as a people.

The *Afroblocers* – a band featured during the carnival season – speak about African history and African ancestry and they take pride in their roots. It inspires people to reconnect with their African heritage. Food does this as well. African dishes are still cooked in El Salvador and food is a form of resistance and reaffirmation of Afro-Brazilian. Thus, the reverberation of African heritage through music, food, dance, and artistic performances is central to the formation and affirmation of the Afro-Brazilian

identifications because as of today, Afro-Brazilian history is not taught in primary schools. It is only when students get to university that they are exposed to it and that is when they start studying their history.

When it comes to Black Muslims, the source of power is found in their religious identity more than anything else. There is also a difference among Black Muslims in Brazil: you have those born and raised in Brazil as Muslims and then you have African immigrants who are now naturalized Brazilian citizens. From the first group, two Black Brazilian Muslims born and raised in Brazil told me during an interview that their Muslim identity is more important than anything else because in Islam everyone is equal in the eyes of Allah. They see Islam as a liberating force that provides a way to navigate the reality of Brazilian society. The second person did say that he found out about Islam by reading and learning about the Malê of Bahia, so the connection with history is always there but for some, their religious identification supersedes their racial identity in terms of how they define and position themselves in Brazilian society. Their political views are like the U.S. model, where they see Black nationalism as a source of inspiration for Black people in Brazil, even though they are Muslims.

For the Africans that immigrate, they will speak about racism a lot because many of them have been discriminated against based not only on their skin tone but also based on their ethnicity. They spoke also about some of the challenges they face, particularly with Arab Muslims in Brazil. The majority of the Muslims in Brazil are Arab and African and Black Muslims report a racial hierarchy within the Muslim community – in São Paulo, which is the largest Muslim community – so I sensed a lot of frustrations.

All these issues intersect with one another: race, gender and then you have also social status and the discrimination that colorism entails as an internal social dynamic in Brazil. It all feels to be a very precarious position to be in as a woman. When you were speaking with Black Brazilian Muslim women, what sense did you get of their positionality and how do they feel being all those things in Brazil?

It is quite difficult for a Black Muslim woman because she is always viewed under different lenses. I think one woman I interviewed said that “to a Brazilian I am Black, but to a foreigner, I am Brazilian,” which means that people assign whatever identity they

see fit – even among Muslims. There is a dehumanization of Black Muslim women and their experience. To white Brazilians, she is not a normal human being and to the foreigners – including Muslims – she is an exotic woman. I had several Muslim men that knew of my travels to Brazil asking me to bring back a Brazilian wife for them. In their imagination lie colonial stereotypes about the hyper-sexualization of the Black female body. And that's why, even with the documentary as it was evolving, I had to figure out how to integrate and connect all these issues because there is so much to be said. I wanted to address the history of the Malê and the Afro-Brazilian experience, but also do justice to the issues like these.

One issue that pertains to Muslim women, and which is a byproduct of colorism in Brazil, is marriage. Because the number of women that convert to Islam is higher than that of men, the issue of marriage is harder for Black women because of colorism. This includes foreigners that want to marry a Brazilian woman. When they find out that she is a Black Brazilian woman, they say no because they want a lighter skin woman.

Let's talk about the documentary. In what way might the documentary reflect a visual storytelling of some of the history of Muslims in Brazil and their historical connections to today's Muslim communities in Brazil?

After my recent book was published, I wanted to produce something that is easily accessible to people and that could deconstruct some of the stereotypes we have about race. In Brazil, some Black people identify as Africans, some as Afro-Brazilians and as outsiders. I wanted to understand, and this is also what I want people to appreciate, is how the nuances of racial identification are not the same as in the U.S. or in Britain or in South Africa. I think it is important to kind of humble ourselves to understand and appreciate how a particular culture of people see the world and what their worldview is before importing our understanding and say, "this is how they see themselves."

While I explore this in my book – *Illuminating Blackness: African Muslims in Brazil* – I wanted to revisit African history, but also the contribution that Africans have made to contemporary Brazil and how they are continuing to inspire a lot of modern-day Black activism and movements, as well as talk about some of the issues that have to do with race relations and the misunderstandings that exist about Black Brazilians.

Where does the title come from? Why call it *Brazil's City of Joy*?

I don't speak Portuguese, but the title is a translation of what Salvador is called in Portuguese. I cannot take credit for that; the title is not mine. It used to have negative connotations during the colonial times, when people from this region were seen as lazy. Now it is different. Compared to other people in different areas such as Rio or Brasilia, there is a very different attitude in El Salvador. I did notice the differences in terms of not only the hospitality, but the way people kind of go about themselves is very different from other major cities. My goal was to show the diversity of people, their beauty, pride, and how people are experiencing life while being Black in Brazil.

In your documentary you explore the history of the Malê community in Brazil and their uprising of 1835 – known as the Malê Revolt – where Islam played a key role as a force for liberation. How does Islam function as a liberation praxis for Muslim Brazilians today?

I think Islam can be, or is seen as, a liberating force or liberation praxis for many Muslims and Afro-Brazilians. Reading the stories and the histories of these courageous African Muslims and how they fought against oppression – they were fighting to liberate not only themselves, but also their African brothers and sisters who were also non-Muslim – is inspiring. They were known to be educated, they could read and write, which was uncommon among most of the enslaved at that time. Several of them bought their freedom, traveled back to Africa to learn more about Islam, and then traveled back to Brazil. For example, the story of Rufino, who was a religious leader. João José Reis wrote a book about Rufino, and I mentioned him in one of the chapters of my book. He was someone that was enslaved and yes, he may have been in a difficult situation, but he didn't have an inferiority complex – his book was translated into English in the 19th-century! Even during some of the police interrogations, people like Rufino were described as “arrogant,” but that means they were very confident in themselves. That is inspiring to me to know that they were strong and confident people. Their faith differentiated them, they were inspired by their faith, and they were known to be troublemakers.

That is a great history they left. They did not feel inferior despite what they were experiencing, and knowing that, I think, has an impact on how you see yourself during any trial and tribulation. It is a lesson on what perspective you take in life when you are experiencing hardship and, if you are patient with yourself, patient with God you will be rewarded as a Muslim. The Qur'an gives the example of Asiya, the wife of the Pharaoh who became oppressed and subjugated. But because of her faith in Allah when she was tortured, she would ask Allah to build her a house in Paradise. So, from the Islamic perspective, she is a liberated woman.

Stories like these are an inspiration. They give a sense of connectedness to the resilience Black Brazilians and Black people have shown around the world. To read about someone in the 19th-century who not only found their way to buy freedom, but then traveled back to West Africa for four months, to learn about the Qur'an and then go back to his brothers and sisters in South America to teach them, you know, this is amazing. That is an example of a strong sense of purpose. This is why I think a number of Brazilian Muslims and Black Brazilian activists look at the likes of the Malê and a lot of the enslaved Africans for what they did because they were people who fought for liberation way before we knew the likes of Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. They are truly heroic figures for me.

I am wondering how much of the Islamic tradition of traveling for learning purposes is central to your writing. Can you talk a little bit about what that looked like historically, particularly with Islam spreading across Africa and how, if at all, you operate from such position?

I tried to. When I think of my writing process, I often think about writers such as Ibn Battuta from Morocco and his travel overseas and his purpose for traveling from Morocco in North Africa around the world and how he spoke about his experiences meeting and learning about other cultures. Often, you marvel at some things, observe differences and similarities and much like him, I like to write things down on paper because if you wait too long you might forget about it and perhaps lose the desire to do so later. That has been my approach to document as much as possible while I was traveling in Brazil over the last six or seven years. I think it is also good because over time people and places change. To be able to have it written down and then go back to it as a

reference is important for the research and process of writing about lived experience. Similar perhaps to how prior to the digital age people had diaries and people used to write down daily experiences. One thing I would say that I noticed and it's not so much a criticism maybe it's difficult is that we don't hear much about the Muslim women's experience and this is in Islamic history, and it is problematic. I am speaking even for myself that if a man is talking about women experience you only going to convey a very small fraction of that experience, and there is a lot of insight that women have that, know and, that other women can relate to which is why I think that it should come from a woman. I understand that there are other reasons why we don't have as many Muslim women writers as we probably should so, the way I look at my work is to maybe inspire people to do similar things. I am not a professional academic nor am I doing a Ph.D. but, I think that a lot of people that are documenting and may travel and write in the form of logs have something to say. There is something special about the written word because what you write is preserved over time and people do kind of take it more seriously. I do think is important that we have more Muslim women talking about their experiences. There is this idea that, "Oh, I am not qualified" and I think is a reservation I've heard several people have when they say they want to write a book but are not sure. If you are speaking about your experiences and your own observations, there is nothing wrong in putting that down on paper. I think we need to see more of that, and I think, hopefully, these things will change.

I always encourage people to write one's own experiences, observations and what they have seen because there is nothing wrong in documenting your life experiences. Don't wait for a publisher or a big institution to kind of give you the approval about what you're passionate about because I am sure that there are people around the world that will be interested in what you have to say and that has been also my experience writing about Brazil.

When I think of the tradition of writing and traveling in Islam, what comes to mind is a genealogy of authors that have transcribed, interpreted, and reinterpreted the teaching of their predecessor as part of Islamic teaching of spreading knowledge. How important is it to you as a writer and author to contribute to that legacy?

It is very important. From an Islamic perspective, we believe that when you leave this life, there are only three things that you are ultimately going to benefit from. The first one is *sadaqah jariyah*, which is continuous charity. The second is a righteous child that prays for you and the third is beneficial knowledge that people benefit from. I do believe that Allah has gifted a lot of us, if not all of us, with something special and I don't think we should be scared to share that. I have something that I am interested in, and I think that other people might be interested in knowing what I have to say so, I am not afraid to put it out into the world. I understand that what I do is not for everyone, and it does not have to be for everyone. But if people are going to benefit from it then, that is good enough for me.

It's also surprising to me that there are students at universities in the UK who are now interested in themes I wrote about ten years ago, specifically about racism and Black empowerment. Back then, not much attention was given to the topic. This was prior to the Black Lives Matter movement. Knowing that people are still benefiting from my earlier work makes me feel very grateful to God. You could say that it is a duty for me to put things on paper, particularly if there is a gap in the research that I am interested knowing more about. Rather than waiting for someone else to do it, I think it is incumbent upon us to do it because it is something that people can benefit from and that we can benefit from after we leave this world. To gain God's favor, forgiveness and grace and I think is great.

I also often think about the earlier African Muslim classic scholars, apart from those who were giving fatwa or religious edicts, they were speaking of different experiences as well. Ibn Battuta or Ibn Qaldun served as social commentators of their time but, when we think of the way western academia today seems to keep important conversation amongst a particular group from reaching the masses, it would seem that, in general, are people in the ivory tower speak about people in the past and may criticize or talk about things that is only for their peer groups to understand but, it is not really

getting to the masses. There is no dialogue between the academics and the people whose histories are being written about.

Writing is also very empowering for me and as lay people that are not academics, they often do not feel that they feel empowered to write about their history, their stories, or their perspectives. That is disheartening. People are often surprised that I write books or when I give presentations. I think that is because I am not an academic and because I am a Black man. That is why representation is important. The fact that many Black people and many Black Muslims do not feel qualified to give our insights and perspectives. In turn, we undersell and undervalue ourselves, which is a big problem. We have voices and we ought to use them to not only speak about the great histories we come from, but also to create our own histories and tell our stories. I find the Qur'an to be the most inspirational book because the Qur'an is always encouraging us to do good work, which is also a way of liberating oneself. In that respect, the Qur'an is very empowering because it is asking for you to do something.