

A Brief History of the Muslims in Panama

by Dr. AbdulKhabeer Muhammad

The first group of Muslims that came to Panama (Central America) came as slaves from Africa, brought by the Spaniards to work the gold mines. Not unlike the Africans in the other parts of the Americas, they refused to be slaves.

In 1552 a group from the Mandinka tribes arrived in Panama. They were always considered as intelligent, industrious slaves and with a higher degree of culture. Of this group, the Vais were the most outstanding blacks of the continent because they had invented a writing system.

Since this famous Mandinka tribe was influenced by Islam, they were all Muslims and it was written in the Spanish Laws of the period that these were prohibited from being brought to the Americas. Yet this was violated, partly because of religious discrimination. ``Mandinka`` was among the colonies synonymous with the devil and evil spirits. There was another reason though. Islamic tradition had developed in them a high sense of pride which made them decisively refuse to be considered slaves of the white man. Many were captured and sold, but their spirit of freedom led them to promote and lead slave uprisings. The Spaniards considered them bad people because they forcibly refused to be slaves.

The group of about 400-500 that arrived on the Atlantic coast of Panama in 1552, escaped from a sinking ship, and began to live and fight to maintain their freedom. This group did not arrive on the mainland as slaves. They elected one of their members called BAYANO or VAINO to be their leader. (My theory is that the name Bayano is a derivative of the Arabic Word bayyan). Bayano led them in their fight against the colonizers.

These Muslims remained steadfast to Islam during the leadership of Bayano. They formed councils, and mosques were built where they held prayers and meetings. These men were steadfast in the faith and Islam, so much that it is related that a couple of them were captured in an ambush, one of the two men were one of the Imams of the group. He was sentenced to die by hanging. They then proposed to him that if he gave up his faith and beliefs, they would be lenient with him; he refused the offer, and he was thrown in a hole with a pack of Great Dane dogs who tore him apart. He persisted in his refusal, and died with his faith, Alhamdulillah. Many more died defending Islam and Freedom.

As a Muslim, Bayano made many covenants with the Governor of Panama which allowed him and his brother Muslims to remain somewhat in peace. Bayano kept his word in all covenants made with the Spaniards; not so the Spaniards. An officer by the name of Ursua was sent to stop the rebellion. Seeing that he could not defeat them, he began to befriend them, and made some agreements with Bayano. These agreements were broken by Ursua by having forty of Bayano's men poisoned at a party he invited them to. Thirty-two died leaving Bayano and seven of his men. When they realized what was happening, some escaped. But, Bayano and his men were captured. He was sent to Peru then to Spain where he died. It is a known fact that these men converted some of the natives to Islam which brought the love for freedom and justice. So the Spanish colonizers set out to kill them all to stop their growth and that of Islam. These Muslims established a society based on Islamic culture, religion and politics. After

Bayano's death, efforts were made to destroy any trace of Islam during that period in Panama. These men lived in the area now known as Darien, San Miguel, Chepo, Pacora, San Blas and the area along the river Baayano, named after Bayano. There is no history as what happened to the Muslims who remained in Panama.

Even the books that teach the history of Panama and Bayano have purposely omitted the fact that he was Muslim. Whenever we lecture on Islam at the various educational institutions and tell them this historical fact, even the professors of history are found lacking. Yet, no one has been able to disprove the historical fact. That is recorded by historian Dr. Fernando Romero in an article titled: *El "Rey Bayano" y Los Negros Panamenos en los mediados del siglo xvi (The "King Bayano" and the Black Panamians in the middle of the XVI century)*.

The second wave of Muslims did not come to Panama until the late 19th century when some came as travelers and remained. One such Muslim was a brother from Lebanon named Muhammad Majdob, who arrived in 1909, established himself as a merchant in the City of Colon on the Atlantic coast, and remained until 1935. From his family, he had a brother named Najim Majdob who recently resettled in the United States of America.

During the years 1904-1913, the group that arrived and settled in Panama to become merchants came from the Indo-Pakistan area, from Lebanon and other Muslim countries. The major group from Indo-Pakistan came from Bengali, Punjab, Peshavir, and Kashmir. Brothers Abdul Jabbar Babu and Ali Akbar led these groups. They numbered 15 to 20 and they came without their families. Therefore, some of them married local women. In 1929 another group came from Bombay. Among them was Muhammad Ibraheem, Salomon Bikhu, the Asvat family, Ismail and Musa, Bhana family and others. They formed an organization called the SUNNI INDO-PAKISTAN Muslim Society. Many of them lived and prayed in a building located in Calle Colon (Colon Street), and then moved to a room in Calle 19. Among the group was the Jalil family who now resides in Vista Alegre; Province of Colon.

During the period 1929-1948, this organization, then named Panama Muslim Mission, began to build a place for prayer on land donated by Ali Akbar. This was to have been the first mosque built in Panama City. This place was half completed and was used for Salatul Eid, and classes for new Muslims, who numbered about 25 during that period. These new Muslims were blacks of West Indian descent, Jamaicans, Trinidadians and Barbadians. Brother Ali Akbar conducted these classes. This locale still exists today and is located on Avenida 12 de Octubre entrance to Pueblo Nuevo, Panama City. Due to the fact that the place was not in use, local government allowed homeless people to reside there. Abdul Jabbar Babu, Ali Akbar and the secretary of Mission Islam, Abdullah Morris, led the group that assisted in the building of that structure.

During the above mentioned period, there was another group practicing Islam in the City of Colon, located on the Atlantic Coast of the Republic of Panama. A Jamaican named Basil Austkan led this group. He rented a place that was used for Salat and meetings. This place was located on Sixth Street and Broadway, Colon. These Muslims dressed in white thobes to pray and fasted during the month of Ramadan and at other times prescribed in Islam.

In 1932 there was a group of Muslim in San Miguel, Calidonia in Panama City who resided in Short Street where they held meetings and prayers.

The Muslims in Panama City from the Indo-Pakistan area had no family structure until 1951 when the first families (wives) arrived. Even though they had built in Pueblo Nuevo, many continued praying in the rented room located on Callo 19, because it was closer to their place of business. One of the brothers by the name of Saliba translated the Quràn to English in order to teach the local people who accepted

Islam. These people spoke English because they came from from the West Indies. During the period of the 1950-60s, they remained worshipping in the two areas of Calle Colon and Calle 19. In 1963, they purchased a plot in the local cemetery called Jardin de Paz in order to bury their dead. In 1991, property was purchased in an area called Arrajain, which is now used solely as a Muslim cemetery.

In the mid-1970s, a group of native Panamanians influenced by the Nation of Islam of Elijah Muhammad, led by Abdul Wahab Johnson, Abdul Kabir A. Malik Reid, and Suleyman Johnson, began propagating Islam. This grew into two groups, one on the Pacific side, Panama City, and the other on the Atlantic side, Colon. After having contact with Dr. Abdulkhabeer Muhammad, who then came to Panama, they began to study true Islam in accordance of the teachings Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the Holy Qur'an. They were provided with books by Abdulkhabeer and taught the basic principles of Islam. In 1977, under the leadership of Suleyman, Abdul Wahab and Abdul Kabir A. Malik, they began holding classes on Sundays in the Firemen's rehearsal hall due to the fact that Suleyman is a fireman. Later they received financial assistance from the Arab merchants living in Colon led by brother Ahmed Sakr. They rented a place on 7th Street and Central Avenue, Colon, where prayers and meetings were held. This group, due to lack of knowledge and assistance, disintegrated.

The Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan area began teaching their children at home in 1965 until 1973, when a small teaching program began in a room above Bazar Hindustan on Central Avenue, Panama City. Prayers and meetings were also held there. In 1978, they began to use a place in the area of Perejil, Panama City, where prayers and meetings were held until the completion of the Jamah Masjid, which was inaugurated on 15 January, 1982. This masjid was built jointly by the Islamic Calla Society of Tripoli, Libya and Salomon Bikhu a local merchant from India, to provide a place for Muslims to meet and pray. Since its inauguration, classes have been held there in the evenings for children and others.

Classes are also held on Sundays at the Masjid in Colon for new Muslims and people interested in Islam, given by Dr. Abdulkhaber Muhammad, and in his absence Hamza Beard.

As of December 1996, there are four masjids in the Republic of Panama and a fifth under construction due to be inaugurated in the month of March 1997. The masjids are located in Panama City, Colon, Aguadulce and David. Islam in Panama began with the advent of slavery to the area and Allah willing, the movement will grow and bring peace, justice and understanding to all the people of Panama, Latin America and the Carribean.

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