

Muslims in the Caribbean Before Columbus

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Ancient America was not isolated from the old world as many historians would have us believe. Knowledge, agricultural products, livestock and other commercial items were exchanged between the two worlds, and Muslims were probably one of the most important contact people before Columbus' voyage.

Evidence leading to the presence of Muslims in the ancient Americas comes from a number of sculptures, oral traditions, eyewitness reports, artifacts, and inscriptions. In Meso-American art we see Africans and Semites in positions of power and prestige, especially in trading communities of Mexico.

A report in *Before Columbus* by Cyrus Gordon describes coins found in the southern Caribbean region: "...off the coast of Venezuela were discovered a hoard of Mediterranean coins with so many duplicates that it cannot well be a numismatist's collection but rather a supply of cash. Nearly, all the coins are Roman, from the reign of Augustus to the 4th century AD. Two of the coins, however, are Arabic of the 8th century AD. It is the latter that give us the terminus a quo (i.e. time after which) of the collection as a whole (which cannot be earlier than the latest coins in the collection). Roman coins continued in use as currency into the medieval times. A Moorish ship, perhaps from Spain or North Africa seems to have crossed the Atlantic around 800 AD."

These coins are solid confirmation of the historical reports recorded by Muslim historians and geographers concerning journeys of Muslim adventurers and navigators across the Atlantic Ocean.

In *Munuj adh-Dhahab*, Al Mas'udi in the year 956 CE wrote about a young man of Cordoba named Khashkhash ibn Saeed ibn Aswad who crossed the Atlantic Ocean and returned in the year 889 CE, Mas'udi wrote: "Some people feel that this ocean is the source of all oceans and in it there have been many strange happenings. We have reported some of them in our book *Akhbar az-Zaman*. Adventurers have penetrated it on the risk of their lives, some returning safely, others perishing in the attempt. One such man was an inhabitant of Andalusia named Khashkhash. He was a young man of Cordoba who gathered a group of young men and went on a voyage on this ocean. After a long time he returned with a fabulous booty. Every Spaniard (Andalusian) knows his story."

A narration by Abu Bakr b. 'Umar al Qutiyya relates the story of Ibn Farukh who landed in Feb. 999 CE in Gando (Great Canary), visited King Guanariga and continued his journey westwards till he found islands he called Capraria and Pluitana. In May of that year he arrived back in Spain.

Al Sharif al Idrisi (1097-1155) the famous Arab geographer reported in his extensive work *The Geography of Al Idrisi* in the 12th century, on the journey of a group of North African seamen who reached the Americas. Al Idrisi wrote: "A group of seafarers sailed into the sea of Darkness and Fog (the Atlantic Ocean) from Lisbon in order to discover what was in it and to what extent were its limit. They were a party of eight and they took a boat which was loaded with supplies to last them for

months.

They sailed for eleven days till they reached turbulent waters with great waves and little light. They thought that they would perish so they turned their boat southward and traveled for twenty days.

They finally reached an island that had people and cultivation but they were captured and chained for three days. On the fourth day a translator came speaking the Arabic language! He translated for the King and asked them about their mission. They informed him about themselves, then they were returned to their confinement. When the westerly wind began to blow, they were put in a canoe, blindfolded and brought to land after three days' sailing. They were left on the shore with their hands tied behind their backs, when the next day came, another tribe appeared freeing them and informing them that between them and their lands war a journey of two months."

This astonishing historical report not only clearly describes contact between Muslim seamen and the indigenous people of the Caribbean islands but it confirms the fact that the contact between the two worlds had been so involved that the native people could speak Arabic!

In October, 1929 Khalid Edhem Bey discovered by chance in the library of Serallo, in the city of Istanbul, a map in parchment made in the month of Muharram of the year 919 AH (March 1513).

The rare and valuable geographical letter contained, among other legends, the following note: "This chapter explains how this map has been made. Such a map nobody owns at present. By the hands of this poor man it has been composed and now elaborated." The discovery was important. As already stated it had to do with a parchment in Turkish writing painted in several colors. It represents the western zone of the world. It comprises the Atlantic Ocean with America and the western rim of the world. The other parts of the world, which undoubtedly the map also included, have been lost.

The author of the map, Piri Muhyid Din Re'is is not unknown. He was a famous navigator and mapmaker who died about 1554-1555. He wrote a handbook on navigation in the Aegean and the Mediterranean Seas, which was known as Piri Re'is Bahriye. Perhaps the map found by Khalil Edhem Bey was a part of this handbook which had been presented to Sultan Selim I in 1517 which would explain how the mysterious parchment was found in Serallo.

Despite the numerous voyages undertaken by the Muslims of Spain and North America, their contact remained limited and fairly secretive. The most significant wave of Muslim explorers and traders came from the West African Islamic Empire of Mali.

When Mama Musa, the world renowned ruler of Mali, was en route to Mecca during his famous pilgrimage in 1324, he informed the scholars of Cairo that his predecessor had undertaken two expeditions into the Atlantic Ocean in order to discover its limits, Al 'Umari in his *Masalik al Absar fi Mamalik al Amsar* reported from his information the following: "I asked the Sultan Musa, says Ibn Amir Hajib,

how it was that power came into his hands. 'We are,' he told me 'from a house that transmits power by heritage.'

The ruler who preceded me would not believe that it was impossible to discover the limits of the neighboring sea. He wanted to find out and persisted in his plan, he had two hundred ships equipped and filled them with men and others in the same number filled with gold, water and supplies in sufficient quantity to last for years. He told those who commanded them: 'Return only when you have reached the extremity of the ocean, or when you have exhausted your food and water.' They went away; their absence was long before any of them returned. Finally, a sole ship reappeared. We asked the captain about their adventures.'

'Prince,' he replied, we sailed for a long time, up to the moment when we encountered in mid-ocean something like a river with a violent current. My ship was lost. The others sailed on and gradually as each one entered this place, they disappeared and did not come back. We did not know what had happened to them. As for me I returned to where I was and did not enter the current.'

"But the emperor did not want to believe him. He equipped two thousand vessels, a thousand for himself and the men who accompanied him and a thousand for water and supplies. He conferred power on me and left with his companions on the ocean. This was the last time that I saw him and the others, and I remained absolute master of the empire."

This report reveals that the Manding monarch made great preparation for the journey and had confidence in its success. His captain, who reported the violent river mid-ocean, must have encountered a mid-ocean current. Two voyages across the Atlantic by Thor Heyerdahl in papyrus vessels, inscriptions found in Brazil, Peru and the United States, proven linguistic transfer into native Amerindian languages, and numerous cultural evidences of Manding presence have established the contrary.

The Manding made contact with the closest land mass to the West African coast, Brazil. They appear to have used it as a base for exploration of the Americas and traveled along rivers in the dense jungles of South America and overland till they reached North America.

Many of the Manding cities of stone and mortar have been reclaimed by the jungle but a large number of these cities were seen by the early Spanish explorers and banderistas (land pirates). One of these banderistas, a native of Minas Geras, has provided many examples of the Manding script and description of the cities in the interior of Brazil.

From Brazil these explorers went west and north of Brazil, they left Brazil but when they reached Lake Titicaca, they were attacked. According to Cieza de Leon, many of these bearded explorers were killed.

But they left the legacy of writing among the Indians of the Koaty Island of lake Titicaca, whose ideograms are the same as that of the Manding scripts and ideograms. The South American expeditions went as far as the Pacific coast, where on a rock on the shore near Ylo, are written the following "Kye Nghe-gyo ghe-su. Kye-ngbe-ta-wo-nde." ["Man. To pursue worship, to mature and become matter without life. Man pursues a cavernous place, i.e, a grave or hole in the ground."]

In Arizona, they left inscriptions which show that the Manding explorers also brought a number of elephants to America with them. Writings and pictographs found in a cave at Four Corners, Arizona discuss the characteristics of the desert.

In Panama the mandinka had such an effect that they are classified as part of the indigenous people of the area. One expert on Middle American traditions, L'Abbe Brasseur de Bourbourg, wrote: "It is thus that today we distinguish the indigenous people of Darien (Panama) under two names, the Manding and the Tul: whose difference perhaps yet recall their distinct origin."

In 1513, when Vasco Nunez de Balboa, the Spanish explorer, reached Panama, he and his party discerned the presence of African people. One of the recorders of the activities of Balboa in 1513, Gomara wrote: "When Balboa entered the Province of Quareca, he found no gold, but some black slaves belonging to the king of the place. Having asked this king where he obtained these black staves he (Balboa) received as an answer that people of that color lived quite near to there and that they were constantly at war with them." Gomara adds "that these Blacks were entirely like the Blacks of Guinea." As late as the mid-nineteenth century, a number of Manding place names still survived in Panama.

From Panama, the Manding traveled north to Honduras. Ferdinand Columbus, the son of Christopher Columbus, recorded black people seen by his father in northern Honduras, he wrote: "But the people who live further east [of Pointe Cavinass] as far as Cape Gracios a Dios are almost black in color," and adds that they "pierce holes in their ears large enough to insert hen's eggs..."

To the southwest, near the Nicaraguan border at Tegulcigalpa another group of Blacks were reported, possibly by Columbus, They were known as "Jaras and Guabas." These names appear to be the same as Jarra in Gambia, Dira in Senegal and Mali which represent a very ancient clan and territorial designation among the Mending - Sarakoles; and "Kaba or Kubba" a name associated with literary or religious people of Islam. These names are clearly part of the legacy left by the early Manding explorers who came from Mali. They are still used in Africa today.

Some of the Muslim Africans of Honduras called themselves "Almamys" prior to the coming of the Spaniards. They were related either to the Africans of northern Honduras seen by Ferdinand Columbus or the "Jaras or Guabas" of Tegulcigalpa. Giles Cauvet in *Les Berberes de l'Amerique* while making an ethnographic comparison between Africa and America stated, "...a tribe of Al-mamys inhabited Hondura...having preceded by little by the arrival of Columbus there." He adds that the title Almamy does not antedate the twelfth century of our era which is the earliest date the Black African Muslims would have been conveyed to the American Isthmus." In the Manding language 'Almamy' was used for Al Imamu - prayer leader or chieftain.

Another part of the pre-Columbian African hereditary legacy is that left with the Carib people from whose name we derive the word 'Caribbean,' One of their scholars wrote in *The Daily Clarion of Belize* on November 5, 1946, "When Christopher Columbus discovered the West Indies about the year 1493, he found there a race of white people (i.e., half breeds) with wooly hair whom he called Caribs, they were seafaring hunters and tillers of the soil peaceful and united. They, hated aggression. Their religion was Mohammedanism and their language presumably Arabic."

On the other hand the British Honduras Handbook states that the Carib "are very clannish and speak a language of their own which they guard jealously. It appears to be basically an African dialect with a strong admixture of French, Spanish and English words."

The Black Caribs, also had a number of clearly Islamic practices like the complete prohibition of the eating of the flesh of swine which they called "coincoin or bouirokou."

The Handbook of South American Indians describes the Caribs with the following: "The most prized possessions of the [Carib] men was the Caracoli, a crescent-shaped alloy of gold and copper framed in wood which the warriors obtained during raids upon the continental [South American] Arawak. Some of the Caracoli were small and served as ear, nose, or mouth pendants; others were large enough to be worn on the chest. They were a sign of high rank, being passed down from generation to generation, and worn only on a ceremonial occasion and during journeys."

Islamic words having a West African, Manding root have been found in native languages not only in the Caribbean region, but also in North America.

The renowned American historian and linguist, Leo Weiner of Harvard University in 1920 wrote a controversial but well documented work entitled Africa and the Discovery of America. He proved in it that Columbus was well aware of the Manding presence and that the West African Muslims had not only spread throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America, but they reached Canada and were trading and intermarrying with the Iroquois and Algonquin Indian nations!

Columbus had recorded the fact that Africans were trading with the Americas. In the narrative of his third voyage he wrote: "Certain principal inhabitants of the island of Santiago came to see him, and they said that to the southwest of the island of Huego, which is one of the Cape Verdes distant 12 leagues from this, may be seen an island, and that King Don Juan was greatly inclined to send to make discoveries to the southwest and that canoes had been found which start from the coast of Guinea and navigate to the west with merchandise."

Columbus later recorded "... That after he would navigate, the Lord pleasing, to the west, and from there would go to this Espanola in which route he would prove the theory of the King John aforesaid: and that he thought to investigate the report of the Indians of this Espanola (Haiti) who said that there had come to Espanola from the south and south-west a black people who have the tops of their spears made of a metal which they call 'guanin' of which he had sent samples to the Sovereigns to have them assayed, when it was found that of 32 parts 18 were of gold 6 of silver and 8 of copper."

Not only was the knowledge of the Presence of Muslims in the Americas known by early Spanish and portuguese explorers, but Muslim geographical and navigational information actually was the foundation of the European expansion. Vasco da Gama is reported to have consulted with Ahmad ibn Majid on the West coast of Africa. Ibn Majid is regarded as the author of a handbook on navigation on the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Southern China and the waters around the West Indies.

In actuality the whole colonization of the Americas by the Spanish was an extension of the Reconquest (Reconquista) of the Iberian peninsula. Muslims had ruled much of Spain for over 700 years dominating Europe culturally, educationally and economically.

The early explorers were, in many cases, Spanish soldiers who had fought in Africa and sailed the seas to destroy the power of Islam. They recognized the influence of Islam wherever they journeyed and did everything in their power to convert the people to Catholicism. When Hernan Cortes, conqueror of Mexico arrived in Yucatan he named the area "El Cairo."

The men of Cortes and Pizarro, some of whom had taken direct part in the struggle against Muslims in Africa or Spain called the Indian temples mezquitas (Spanish for masjid, mosque).

By a rare paradox the first Christian to see the American land, Rodrigo de Triana or Rodrigo de Lepe, on his return to Spain became a Muslim abandoning his Christian allegiance "because Columbus did not give him credit nor the King any recompense, for his having seen before any other man, light in the Indies."

During the rule of Ferdinand the Catholic, in spite of excesses against Islam in Spain, some of the Moriscos who traveled to the Americas as explorers, soldiers and laborers began practicing their true faith and succeeded in propagating Islam to the Indians. A series of laws were decreed in order to stop the flow of Muslims free or enslaved, to the Americas and to win back the Muslim native Indians. The following shows the attitude of the Spanish hierarchy to this pressing problem.

"The King: To our officials who reside in the city of Seville at the House of trade in the Indies. We are informed that because of the increase in the price of Negro slaves in Portugal and in the islands of Guinea and Cape Verde, some merchants and other persons who intend to have them for our Indies have gone or sent to buy Negroes in the islands of Sardinia, Majorca, Minorca and other parts of the Levant in order to send them to our Indies because they say that they are cheaper.

And because many of the Negroes in those parts of the Levant are of the race (casta) of the Moors and others trade with them and (since) in a new country where at present our holy Catholic faith is being established it is not fitting that people of this quality should go there, in account of the difficulties that could come from it. I order you that under no circumstances or by any means shall you consent to the passage to our Indies, islands or tierra firma of any Negro slaves who may be from the Levant or who may have been brought up there, or of other Negroes who may have been reared with Moriscos, even though they be of the race of Negroes of Guinea. Made in Valladolid, July 16, 1550. Maximilano. The Queen. By order of His Majesty, His Highness in his name Juan de Samano. Seal of the Council."

In another edict, the King wrote: "You are informed that if such Moors are by their nationality and origin Moors, and if they should teach Muslim doctrines, or wage war against you or the Indians or who may have adopted the Muslim religion you shall not make slaves by any means whatsoever. On the contrary you shall try to convert them or persuade them by good and legitimate means to accept our holy Catholic faith."

