

Breaking Ground: The Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project as a Template for Mosque Transformation and Development in America

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of mosques, or masjid in plural, in America after Imam W.D. Mohammed assumed leadership of the then Nation of Islam and named it the World Community of Al-Islam in the West (WCiW). The societal, institutional and cultural challenges facing the distinct communities of Muslim in America historically stymied mosque development for years before the introduction of a new stabilizing force that produced massive growth of the physical institution of a mosque or masjid. This stabilizing force was a nationwide organization. An examination of The Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project, that produced Masjid Jauharatul Islam in Phoenix and Tempe Cultural Center in Tempe, was an initiative directly related to Imam W.D. Mohammed, in particular, reflects the experiences in funding, ownership and actual architecture of mosque building nationwide.

Keywords: Imam W.D. Mohammed, Masjid Jauharatul-Islam, Phoenix, Arizona, Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project, mosques built by African American Muslims

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1. Introduction

In 1975 when Imam Warith Deen Mohammed took over as leader of the old Nation of Islam, he told his followers that they were to “Remake the World.” In so saying and doing, Imam W.D. Mohammed transformed not only the beliefs and practices of the membership of the organization, but also revolutionized Islam in America. Imam W.D. Mohammed inherited what was the largest organized movement in ‘black’ America that was not connected with the church. That base gave Imam W.D. Mohammed a world stage watching what direction he was going to take a community known to be militant, serious, disciplined, and ethnocentric with its own accumulated wealth and cultural norms. At the very beginning of his leadership, Imam W.D. Mohammed moved away from direct influence from the Muslim immigrant community.

This was pivotal in establishing the framework for indigenous community development. Imam W.D. Mohammed pushed for collective individual responsibility to learn, understand and apply the tenets of Islam for his followers. This action propelled indigenous African American Muslims in his association to begin building and renovating mosques and Islamic schools. Imam W.D. Mohammed’s efforts to remake the world and establish Islamic community life, was by design a nationwide effort. It was the first time in the history of the indigenous African American Muslim experience, that there would be a collective and purposeful move towards building and sustaining an actual structure that was supposedly representing true Islam on a nationwide level.

The additional uniqueness of Imam W.D. Mohammed’s strategy was to not only establish and build masjid across the United States as indigenous peoples, but allow each established institution local autonomy reflective of the local memberships’ particular sensibilities and history. Later the same year that Imam W.D.

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Mohammed moved in this direction, so too did the Muslim Brotherhood or Muslim Student Association (MSA) begin a nationwide program of building Islamic cultural centers with funding from overseas governments and organizations. In addition, other indigenous African American Muslim communities not in association with Imam W.D. Mohammed also found themselves swept up in this new dynamic. As the building of all masajid in the Islamic architecture and style was relatively new in the 1970's when this historic transition was taking place, the new masajid that developed were often patterned from Islamic structures in other parts of the world, whether they were renovated structures or built from the ground up. Jauharatul-Islam in Phoenix, Arizona was part of the Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project and was one of the first movements by the community in association with Imam W.D. Mohammed to establish a lasting institution. The challenges that the project faced with funding, ownership, architecture and design, and the resolution process to these issues reflect the traditional responses both in the past, present and perhaps future in the American Muslim community. Its' development, history and challenges serve as a microcosmic example that was played out repeatedly in other localities across the United States.

2. History – The First Experience Transformed

The Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project began in 1977. However, it was preceded and shaped by the unique history and struggles of indigenous African American Muslims and the events in Imam W.D. Mohammed's life. At the Nation of Islam annual 'Savior's Day' in 1975, the then Wallace D. Muhammad was chosen as the new leader of the organization. However, this leadership change was much more far reaching than just a new personality. It involved a complete transformation of ideology, thought and practice. The new leader would not only teach the people the true religion of Islam, but would not seek to regurgitate the leadership, ideological interpretation or dogma from the Middle East. His leadership over the next thirty years would shape what some would call the 'second resurrection' or 'second experience' as an outgrowth of the 'first experience' African Americans converts had with transitioning from Christianity to the Nation of Islam. Imam W.D. Mohammed's leadership style though charismatic and transformative was shaped by his past, the legal wrangling of the old Nation of Islam, his father's authoritative management style and his own understanding of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and how he too transformed a community in a short time period.

2.1 The indigenous African American experience – the search for identity

The Nation of Islam was not the only 'Islamic' movement in the United States. In fact, the history of African American Islam is long and quite complicated. The first notable Muslims were involuntary immigrants brought from Africa and enslaved in the Americas. The institution of slavery itself did not foster a realistic ability for Africans to pass along their religious heritage. Muslims who did survive have unique stories of their own experience, but Islamic practices and beliefs were not passed down to future generations. The unique historical circumstances of African Americans made the continuity of the development of an Islamic community nearly impossible. Africans who were captured and arrived in the Americas, arrived to what has been termed a 'hostile' environment that went to great lengths to outlaw and subjugate Al-Islam to the point that despite the best efforts to practice and leave clues – 'African Islam did not survive in its orthodox form.

However, Islam would find a way back to American society. The unique dynamic of the American experience in general at the end of slavery and the early 1900's actually set the stage for the reemergence of Islam. African American Christians found safety in the institution of the 'black church'. The Islamic groups that emerged in America found that being an 'organization' allowed for reintegration of Islamic thought and provided a way for these newly freed people to embrace Islam, in a protective environment. These early groups all embraced the idea of defining the 'black man' as something other than just an ex-slave, but rather a Moor or a Muslim. Adherents overwhelmed and disappointed with Christianity and searching for a new definition of self, embraced the new religion which offered dignity, history, a connection to something larger and no longer just a victim of slavery.

3. The Muslim Immigrant experience search for identity

Just as enslaved Muslim Africans struggled to maintain their Islamic identity, so too was the struggle of the new arrivals from the Middle East, Asia and North Africa, even without explicit laws to disrupt the dissemination of Islamic culture. These immigrants found that the racism and ethnocentric leanings of American society, stymied their attempts to comfortably establish Islamic communities. It was not until the 1820's that the U.S. started keeping records of immigration. Before 1890 most immigrants were northern Europeans. The 1890's to the early 1920's saw the largest number of immigrants to this country with the majority being from southern and Eastern Europe.

However, the 1965 immigration and naturalization law signed by President Lyndon Johnson literally changed the faced of immigration in America. The original purpose of the law was to reunite families from different parts of Europe here in America. The unintended result was a wave of immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America. According to the online Magazine, "The American Muslim Perspective", the immigration of 'Muslim' immigrants has been described as arriving in four waves: In the first wave, from 1875-1912, Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian laborers migrated and became factory workers and peddlers. The first wave ended with the First World War. In 1924 the door to non-European immigration clanged nearly shut.

In the second wave, from 1930-1938, Arabs from across the Middle East arrive as laborers. The second wave was brought to a halt by the Second World War. The third wave from 1947-1960: Palestinians, Egyptians and Eastern European Muslims arrive. Many were well educated. The fourth wave from 1967-Present: In 1965 the Johnson Administration introduced many changes in the immigration laws that initiated the third wave of immigration, which continues to the present. Muslims from Asia (primarily the Indian sub-continent), the Arab world and Africa. A recent Pew study revealed that only 16 percent of the Muslim immigrant population arrived in the United States before the 1980's.

Early immigrants struggled to maintain both their ethnic and religious identity in an America that didn't have open arms to immigrants that were culturally different and non-Christian. Those who had immigrated found that without the 'normalizing' institutions of home, that building a lasting or significant Islamic community eluded them even with the constant influx of new members to revive their efforts.

4. Organizations as a stabilizing force

So, both indigenous African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims were stagnated and in need of a catalyst to not only stabilize, but also guide and push the growth of the Islamic community. That catalyst came in April of 1975 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, when the then Wallace D. Muhammad called for his community to "Remake the World" . This historical speech sparked initiatives that transformed the Islamic landscape in America. As the new leader, Imam W.D. Mohammed brought about drastic and lasting change. Imam W.D. Mohammed's transformative leadership style was to move his community from nationalism to embracing part of the larger community of Muslims worldwide. Conscious of how language moves to action, Imam W.D. Mohammed first changed the name of this group of Muslims from 'Nation of Islam' to the 'World Community of Al-Islam in the West'. He decentralized the organization and emphasized and demanded individual responsibility and autonomy for his members in each of their respective cities.

Under the old Nation of Islam organizational structure, donations from members were centralized in the headquarters in Chicago and distributed. This created property and financial holdings for the Nation of Islam. However, in the 60's and early 70's there were legal issues both warranted and unwarranted facing the old Nation of Islam. Imam W.D. Mohammed recognized the need for each community to have its own economic solvency. As he assumed leadership, legal issues and concerns from government agencies, women and courts became 'his' to solve. The result was that properties were sold off and monies paid to courts and other stake holders. As Imam W.D. Mohammed began the process of economic stabilization, he also began to train those in leadership positions how to be leaders from the Islamic perspective. Years prior to assuming this leadership position, W.D. Mohammed's mother, Clara Muhammad, hired teachers, most notably the Palestinian, Dr. Jamil Diab, to instruct him and his younger brother in Arabic, Quran and Islamic fiqh. Although this put him often at odds with the ideology of his father during the Nation of Islam days causing him to be ex-communicated twice, he continued to study and even influenced the late Malcolm Shabazz to make pilgrimage to Mecca and embrace a more traditional Islam. As his knowledge base of the history and life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) of over 1400 years ago grew, W.D. Mohammed prepared to introduce this more accurate Islam to his father's followers.

As Imam W.D. Mohammed assumed leadership, classes for Muslim men interested in being 'Imams' or spiritual examples and leaders of the community in prayer, were set up across the nation. Temples and the propaganda within them were dismantled and Imam W.D. Mohammed demanded the establishment of 'mosques' –or places for Islamic religious worship. These mosques were to be completely sovereign entities within themselves. By the end of 1976, there were 137 official mosques in his association as the then Wallace D. Muhammad became the 'Chief Imam' of his community. This was unprecedented in America as these renovated building were transformed into traditional houses of worship complete with wudu stations, prayer rugs and Quran calligraphy. In 1977, with a generous donation from Muhamad Ali, Imam W.D. Mohammed took what was one of the largest delegations of Americans at the time, on hajj with him thus exposing African American Muslims to architecture of mosques in the Middle East and Africa.

5. Development of 'identity' through Physical Infrastructure

The Muslim community in Phoenix was shaped by these events. In the early 60's the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, built a home for himself and another from his secretary, on Violet Drive in South Phoenix. He had taken refuge in Arizona due to his asthma. The Nation of Islam had three temples upon his death, one on 16th Street and Broadway, 24th Street and Van Buren and 32nd Street and West Buckeye Road in the Phoenix area. As the new 'Chief Imam' took over, some followers who did not support his leadership left the community. The need for three meeting areas was no longer necessary. In 1976, Imam W.D. Mohammed was selling and redistributing properties owned by the Nation of Islam all across America. Phoenix was not exempt from this process. The temple on 16th Street and Broadway was property owned by Imam Mohammed's family, so this was sold. The decrease in membership caused the community to let go of the property on 2nd and Van Buren leaving the property on 32nd and West Buckeye as the only remaining real estate. This building would be known as 'Muhammad's Mosque #32' as part of the 137 buildings across America. In temples nationwide, chairs were removed, carpets installed, bathroom renovated, political propaganda taken off the wall and replaced with Quranic sayings. The interior of these buildings would have the best representation of what was expected to be inside a mosque and all would go by the name "Muhammad's Mosque" and then a corresponding number based on when established. The mosque in Phoenix was the 32nd created.

Imam W.D. Mohammed had a vested interest in the Phoenix and came to the region to handle both business and personal affairs. He retired the Nation of Islam administration and reassigned leadership to a member who had moved there from Colorado, Abdur-Rahim Shamsid-Deen because he was excelling in the 'Imam's' classes established to train Muslim men Islamic history, fiqh of Sunnah, Arabic, Quran and leadership in the community. Also in Phoenix at the time were a long time family friend and teacher of Imam W.D. Mohammed – Dr. Jamil Diab, who was at that time the U.S. Consulate to Jordan. The new Imam Shamsid-Deen and Dr. Diab were not only friends, but shared the same vision of building a mosque. Imam A.R. Shamsid-Deen was one of the many who accompanied W.D. Mohammed on hajj in 1977.

Imam W.D. Mohammed's call to his community to 'build mosques' was answered in just two years. In large urban areas established building were renovate. Phoenix had only one property and was in an area with plentiful land so they put their energies in building a totally new structure to reflect their newfound Islamic understanding and identity. The psychological need for a physical structure to reflect the Islamic identity was felt by all Muslims in the United States. Early African American Islamic movements sought what would be known as sacred space to reflect their 'Islam-ness'. Pseudo Islamic groups like the Nation of Islam and Moorish Science Temple did not build mosques because it was not in their ideology to do so. However, other African American Muslim communities that began from the early 1900's to 1960's, including the Ahmadiyyah Movement, the Universal Islamic Society, First Muslim Mosque of Pittsburg, the Islamic Brotherhood, the Nation of Islam, the Islamic Mission Society, State Street Mosque and Fahamme Temple of Islam and Culture, all had their own unique development.

Although each group created their own sacred space, one continuity that is seen with all groups was that Islamic centers and mosques that were opened during the early 1900's were not large, elaborate, ornate buildings, but rather structures with outward names or emblems to set them apart from being mistaken as a 'regular' building. Most of the African American Islamic movements were largely regional in nature in with membership confined to a particular city or section of the county. The progression of actual physical structure development was slow. It required large memberships and each African American Muslim organization usually existed independent if not resistant to each other.

Surprising almost all these movements had immigrants who taught their cultural version of Islam to the African Americans. This fact would shape the sacred space. The materialization of what could be known as an actual mosque in name and design was in these early years limited and plagued by political and economic strife. For example, in Harlem, Minister Malcolm X opened a 'mosque' in 1957 after breaking with the Nation of Islam. However, it was nearly destroyed by enemies after his assassination and not reopened until 1965 and later reintegrated into the community of Imam W.D. Mohammed. This forced renovation brought about one of the first Middle Eastern, architecturally styled mosques in America for indigenous Muslims. However, it is interesting to note that there was a relationship between Imam W.D. Mohammed and Malcolm Shabazz as both were ex-communicated from the Nation of Islam in the 60's. Also, in the midst of all African American Islamic groups in New York and in the north east at the time, this was only 'one' building and even it was influenced by contact with Imam W.D. Mohammed. Because other African American Muslim organizations were not nationwide, there was no other national 'organizational' masjid building being done in the late 1970's and 80's by other African American Islamic groups.

Besides the regional nature of some groups, the rise of the wahhabi or 'salafi' school of thought from Saudi Arabia within African American Islam bogged its adherents down in Islamic reasoning and argument (daleel) with themselves rendering them unable to build any physical institutions. This by no means implies that there was no progression towards masjid building from African American Muslims communities that were not in association with Imam W.D. Mohammed. Many individual African American Muslim communities began to renovate and update their structures as well. Interestingly, this process began because of the perceived notion that Imam W.D. Mohammed was not 'Muslim enough' due to his outgrowth from the Nation of Islam and American patriotism.

Although there were diverse Islamic ideologies within the African American Muslim community, they were often perceived as one, by members of the immigrant Muslim community. African American Muslims experienced communal outrage and hurt as immigrants from third world countries came to the United States in droves, yet refused to attend 'the black masjid' claiming the location or building was substandard. This was especially troubling since most of these immigrants were from what was perceived to be second and third world countries where poverty engulfed their nation. Although these attitudes of not accepting the established Islam in America's city compromised the Islamic psyche of African American Muslims in aggregate, it did not slow the establishment of masjid in the African American community.

6. Mosque development amongst immigrant Muslims

In the immigrant community, 1976 was also a pivotal year as they too seemed to answer Imam Mohammed's call to 'remake the world' and establish mosques. Attempts by Muslim immigrants to build mosques and Islamic centers from within their own local resources, were always small, sometimes short lived and seldom resulted in a physical structure that actually looked like a traditional mosque, especially from the outside. For instance in North Dakota an attempt to build a masjid failed because too many of the Muslim immigrants had become too acculturated into American society and no longer valued an Islamic institution.

Before the mid 1970's, nationwide efforts at mosque building as a unified group of Muslim immigrants, lacked decisiveness because the people were too divided into separate ethnic groups. All significant Islamic centers built were funded by their respective foreign governments. If a structure was large or had Islamic architecture like the Islamic center in Washington, D.C. built in the 1940's, it was because it was part of an initiative that went well beyond the monetary fund raising efforts of local Muslims. Muslim immigrants found that without an organization to lead and guide their efforts, their progression of physical development of mosques, mirrored that of indigenous African American Muslim initiatives. Just as Imam W.D. Mohammed organized the World Community of Al-Islam in the West (WCIW), as a stabilizing force for his community, the Muslim Student Association – MSA served the same purpose for the Muslim immigrant community. In the 1960's, a Saudi charity funded the establishment of the MSA. The first MSA chapter was then formed on the campus of University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The MSA also known as 'Ikhwaan' set propagating Hanafi and Wahhabi schools of Islamic thought in the United States. Coincidentally, in the late 1970's the MSA began mass mosque building with monies largely transferred from Arabian Gulf states.

A 2001 report entitled "The Mosque in America: A National Portrait," published by the Council on American-Islamic Relations reported that only two percent of mosques or masajid in America were built before 1950 and a full 87 percent founded after 1970. Reports show that more than fifty percent of American mosques founded were after 1980. The MSA and its affiliate, North American Islamic Trust (NAIT) purport that it holds the titles of about 27 percent of the mosques in America. U.S. government reports fueled by investigation and suspicion, report the holdings as much higher. For example, the statement of J. Michael Waller, Annenberg Professor of International Communication at the Institute of World Politics before the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism on October 14, 2003, purported that NAIT finances, owns and subsidizes up to 79 percent of the mosques in America and seeks to marginalize Muslim leaders in the United States that do not adhere to their wahhabi school of thought. After 1975 the MSA construction of Islamic centers not only united Muslim immigrants, but created a sacred space that reminded them of home. They would struggle with their competing cultures and ethnicities, but the success would outweigh the challenges.

Although the MSA has never explained the coincidental nature of their mosque construction coinciding with that of the community of the Imam W.D. Mohammed, trustees of the MSA have publicly stated that Imam W.D. Mohammed's appearance as a new leader of Islam in America caused them to have to think and act in a different way and move forward.

7. The Genesis of Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project

With the historical perspective of mosque building attempts and efforts in America through time, an examination of the local imitative in Phoenix, illustrates both present and future potential physical institutional development in the Muslim community. In Phoenix, in the mid 70's the Muslims of the World Community of Al-Islam in the West opened their 'mosque doors' to everyone. A pivotal relationship between three men emerged – Imam A.R. Shamsid-Deen, Dr. Jamil Diab and Colonel Sulaiman Ali Al-Shaye a student at Arizona State University and member of the Saudi military. The new hope and enthusiasm among the members of the World Community of Al-Islam was infectious and a collective vision began to emerge. This new vision drove Imam Shamsid-Deen, Dr. Diab and Colonel Al-Shaye to create the Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project. Like all masjid building efforts during the late 1970s, the vision for masjid ownership was not the same. Ownership in this sense was not just what ideological school of thoughts, but what organization would hold the deed for the structure.

Everyone wanted a new masjid; Dr. Diab wanted a nod to his displaced homeland, Palestine; Colonel Al-Shaye wanted a recognizable middle eastern design in this 'American' desert; but Imam Shamsid-Deen wanted the masjid to reflect the membership, history, struggle and needs of its main membership, who were all followers of Imam W.D. Mohammed and would find self definition in building such a structure. The idea of sacred space being a defining factor of one's 'Muslim-ness' was lost on the other two trustees. Their own cultural and social dynamic did not allow for this interpretation of 'being' Islamic. However, Dr. Jamil Diab was a long time friend and even teacher of Imam W.D. Mohammed, whom he both loved and respected. He too had been displaced from his country and knew from personal experience of the struggle for Islamic identity in a foreign environment, even if he didn't fully understand the African American Muslim's psychological drive for acceptance by other Muslims. Colonel Al-Shaye of the MSA understood the need for a mosque as *Dawah* for Muslims. This struggle for physical and psychological ownership was nationwide. In Phoenix, however, the unique resolution was not only representative of what was happening at the time, but also forward thinking.

8. Funding

The economic capital to build a masjid was of great importance. History had shown that efforts through local funds seldom netted significant or lasting results for African Americans or Muslim immigrants. Dr. Jamil Diab, working in the dynamic that the immigrant community had used for mosque building in the past, wrote a letter to the then King Khaled in Saudi Arabia requesting assistance for the construction of a mosque in Phoenix that could be used by Muslim students attending college at Arizona State University. Colonel Sulaiman Ali Al-Shaye hand carried Dr. Diab's letter to the King, which was well received. But the followers of Imam W.D. Mohammed in Phoenix were less concerned that the King of Saudi Arabia approve or support their plan for masjid building, but rather that the mosque would be in association with Imam W.D. Muhammad. Frank Mu'Min a 90 year old man and son of a slave, purchased and donated 4.4 acres of land in South Phoenix jump starting the project. The African American Muslims quickly raised another \$30,000 from among them and used their community expertise to propel the project forward.

The secretary, Wazir Karim was also a certified Realtor, able to secure and procure land. The assistant Imam in the masjid, Lamar Hasson, was also a licensed contractor. The Imam's wife, Ummil-Kheer Shamsid-Deen, was also an interior decorator with architectural training. The principal of the school, Malik Abdullah, was also a landscaper. Muslims, who had not foreseen the establishment of a mosque in Phoenix, began to see that this dream could be realized. In Phoenix, although the MSA had been there for more than five years, it was not until the project began that they came forward to offer monies through Al-Qaf – an Islamic Trust fund. But, this was rejected by the community in Phoenix under the recommendation of Imam W.D. Mohammed.

By the second year of his leadership, followers of Imam W.D. Mohammed were making mass renovations to turn their buildings into a 'mosque'. In early 1978, the Phoenix Muslim had raised nearly \$200,000 for the project and wrote Imam W.D. Mohammed to apprise him of their progress. His new assistant, Imam Shakir Mahmoud, of Boston served as a liaison and helped with legal advice. Colonel Sulaiman Ali Al-Shaye collected monies from private citizens overseas. But again, the followers of Imam Mohammed in Phoenix rejected these funds because the donors who donated from overseas had done so with the condition that money was registered through Al-Qaf or the Islamic Trust Fund or NAIT – North America Islamic Trust. These two organizations would later go on to fund a number of masajid in America, with the stipulation that they select and install their own chosen Imam. This stipulation was summarily rejected by the followers of Imam W.D. Mohammed who made it clear to his followers that in order to avoid being drawn in by or taken over by a religious ideology or school of thought that was foreign to U.S. Muslims, that his community should not accept funds from overseas.

These stipulations from both sides – WCIW and MSA created problems for the three trustees. But together they came to a mutual agreement that instead of outright rejecting and returning the funds given as gifts, donations from overseas would now go into a separate account and be used to build yet another masjid. Thus the Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project became more than just the building of Jauharatul-Islam in South Phoenix, but now also included what was to become the Tempe Cultural Center in Tempe, Arizona.

9. Significance of the Name

Interestingly, this development of the project being split into two – the idea of a mosque for the African American Muslims and a mosque for Muslim immigrants was what was actually happening in the U.S. nationwide in the Muslim community. Each mosque that was being renovated or built in the United States had the issue of ownership suffocate its efforts. Members of WCIW and MSA were at distinct and clear odds. Other indigenous Muslim groups found themselves just as unwilling to give up autonomy for the sake of funding. The result was a strange ethnic and racial divide that mirrored that of the American Christian dynamic of segregated churches. The naming of these structures reflected the collective social dynamic of the Muslim community in America. The masjid built in South Phoenix named Jauharatul Islam was so named because of the historical significance and the physical presence of the masjid. During the Islamic month of fasting, Ramadan, of the year that the masjid was built, the Muslims would gather each night to breakfast and participate in the extra night prayers performed in Ramadan called 'Taraweh'. Colored lights were placed around the building, which were reflected off the minaret like a jewel. Thus, the membership voted and chose the name Jauharatul-Islam – Jewel of Islam for their masjid.

However, this decision was not made lightly. Muslims in Phoenix considered the name 'Masjid Umar ibn Syeed (Said)' after an African scholar from Senegal who was enslaved in the Carolinas, who openly wrote how Allah (God) has sovereignty over the human being in his autobiography. They also examined 'Masjid Ismail' after the son of Prophet Ibrahim from his wife Hagar (Hajrah in Arabic) who was also believed to be ethnically of African heritage. They almost choose the name 'Masjid Bilal'. Imam Mohammed at that time, had began calling his members 'Bilalians' after Bilal ibn Rabah, the first muezzin or caller to prayer in Islam who was also Abyssinian and a slave. This term "Bilalian" would be symbolic of how these Muslims who had formerly been enslaved were now calling America to Islam.

Nationwide, many mosques in association with Imam Mohammed took on the name of Bilal, as a symbolic recognition of this body of Muslims owning their heritage as both Muslims and people of African descent. Imam W.D. Mohammed encouraged the community of Muslims in his association to embrace their totality as human beings and intertwine their African, American and Islamic identities as one. Many masjid in his association reflect this thought.

10. Architecture

The architectural design for building of the mosque was a new dynamic. The question was how "American" in style it should be. Muslims across America looked to the examples from the Muslim world in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. There are certain features to a mosque that are agreed upon worldwide. This includes a 'musallah' or main prayer hall, an area for people to do ritual washing for prayer called 'wudu', usually a 'minaret' from which the call to prayer is made, a small curved niche in the front wall indicating the direction of Mecca for prayer called 'mihrab', an area marked off in some way to separate men and women for prayer and even a dome and 'minbar', which is a raised pulpit.

In Phoenix, the Muslims were in a unique position of having weather and geographical patterns that mirrored that of many parts of the Islamic world since they were in a desert. They examined the design of masjid in desert areas, assuming these structures would take into account the unique circumstances of a hot climate. The Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia Grand was the first inspiration, but elements were taken from everywhere. For instance, a gate surrounding the whole structure made from stone and stucco excludes the public from the inside courtyard and actual Masjid. The door to the gate was elaborately decorated with geometric design to symbolize that the entrant was entering into a specific place. These were built to mirror North African mosque and castle fortress structures.

Like many mosques in North Africa and Spain, Jauharatul Islam was a vast rectangular hall with the interior divided by rows and columns. Its entrance included an elaborate courtyard with arches decorated in geometrical design, a marble tiled walkway and a center courtyard with flowering plants and a water fountain in the center. Unlike traditional fountains designed for ablution in mosques around the world, this was more a symbolic and decorative with supplementary 'wudu' areas in the bathroom, typical of a more American structure. The structure also had a minaret rising from the mosque like a watchtower.

The minaret itself had three silver dome balls that glistened both in the sun and in the night stars and street lights. Just outside of the courtyard, but still encased within the stucco gate, lies an area called 'jannah' or garden. This aspect is similar to monastic style mosques used for spiritual reflection. The area has fruit trees to make it sweet smelling but offered the entrant privacy.

Outside the entrance to the actual mosque itself are area designated for shoes. Strong wooden doors one on the right, left and two in the middle serve as entry ways for both men and women. Inside the actual mosque are the stucco columns, main prayer area with plush carpeting and imported Persian rugs, and a curved niche in the wall, 'mihrab', framed by two columns decorated in marble tile with geometric markings setting in the center pointing out the direction of Mecca. Also, included are offices, library, and kitchen and meeting rooms. This is reminiscent of the madressa or school style mosques built around the world which serve as a purpose beyond just a place for prayer. Although many mosques or masajid in association with Imam W.D. Mohammed were not afforded the ability to have such elaborate designs as this, most include these features to the best of their ability. Geometric design, calligraphy, installed mihrabs, meeting rooms and kitchens are usually present.

11. Conclusion

Imam W.D. Mohammed's legacy lives on today as additional mosques continue to be built. Like most people in history, the true extent of his impact will not be fully understood until examined in time by scholars and historians. Although recognized and honored all over the world by leaders of all religious faiths, it was not until the year before he passed that the African American Muslim community came out of a collective fog of denial and openly celebrated his accomplishments at the Muslim Alliance of North America conference in November of 2007 in Philadelphia. Immediately upon his death, Islamic Horizons, the bi-monthly publication of the Islamic Society of North America dedicated an issue for him where he was called an Islamic Scholar, humanitarian, religious ambassador and peace advocate. The two major articles were written by African Americans themselves in association with Imam Mohammed, Gambia born Dr. Sulayman Ngang, and Kauthar B. Umar.

However, tributes from ISNA and other notable Muslims acknowledging his accomplishments, and an apology by Azhar Usman a Pakistani comedian for the complicity in the Muslim immigrant community to downplay the life and accomplishments of Imam W.D. Mohammed. Then in July of 2009 at the annual ISNA convention in Washington, D.C., Dr. Sayyid M. Sayeed, previous MSA president and National Director of ISNA made the public statement in a workshop set up as tribute to Imam W.D. Mohammed that the Imam had transformed even the immigrant community because he brought about a new way of thinking. The old Nation of Islam, he said was always an unspoken elephant in the room that they could never explain, but that Imam W.D. Mohammed challenged them to speak and do – sometimes things they had never done before like placing women in equal and even leadership positions, dawah for non-Muslims and the purpose and scope of organizational development both physical and ideological. Recognition and acknowledgement, though long in coming, establish Imam W.D. Mohammed as a singular phenomenon whose scope was much more far reaching than just transitioning thousands into mainstream Islam and prevailing upon his followers that being American and Muslim was not an unsolvable dichotomy. As Mukhtar Muhammad, author of "Genesis of New American Leadership" stated, "Imam W.D. Mohammed was a new mind, new intellect coming out of America. Even as his supporters are currently in a state of national mourning, the community of Muslims in association with Imam W.D. Mohammed will mature. There is a time lag between charismatic and institutional leadership, he says, but already in this association we see the beginnings of the transformation and maturity into institutionalization in a few masajid."

There has been no survey amongst American Muslims as to who or what they believe pushed the rapid growth of masjid development in the United States in the late 70's to now. However, the history of Muslims in America and the corresponding significant rise in mosque development after Imam W.D. Mohammed assumed leadership is a correlation that cannot be ignored. The Phoenix Mosque and Institute Project though not the defining achievement was certainly a defining example of a particular moment in time in the United States in the Muslim community. The manner in which this project resolved its challenges is indicative of future practices that will and are already developing in the United States among indigenous and immigrant Muslims. Today, stipulations of ownership are not as stringent and many masajid in association with Imam W.D. Mohammed may join with other Islamic entities to fund existing projects. Mutual consultation, agreement and respect for the history and dreams of each partner will be the driving force propelling future projects which have the capacity to indeed "Remake the World". As these projects move forward the participants already have an example of how to break ground, build and thereby transform the American landscape.

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End Notes

¹ Aleem, El-Amin, Muhammad, Chambers, Hanif (2006) p. 149

² Muhammad (personal communication March 2010)

³ Austin (1997) p. 4-6

⁴ Diouf (1998) p. 3-4

⁵ "Immigration" p. 10-11.

⁶ Ludden, 2006

⁷ Ghazali, 2004

⁸ Pew Research Center (2007) p. 15

⁹ Smith (1999) p. 54

¹⁰ Smith (1999) p.151

¹¹ Smith (1999) p. 168

- ¹²J. Diab, personal interview March 1984
- ¹³Taken from the "Emam Kit" issued in 1976 to 'Emams' in the WCIW.
- ¹⁴Aleem et. al., (2006) p. 153
- ¹⁵McCloud (1995) p. 10-38
- ¹⁶Mccloud (1995) p. 12-36
- ¹⁷Masjid Malcolm Shabazz (2002)
- ¹⁸Lee (2010)
- ¹⁹Smith (1999) p. 56-59
- ²⁰History of the Islamic Center (Washington DC)
- ²¹Muslim Student Association (2010)
- ²²The Mosque in America p.
- ²³Waller statement before Senate Subcommittee (2003) p 6
- ²⁴Syeed 2009 ISNA conference
- ²⁵See figure "February 24, 1978" letter to Imam W.D. Mohammed
- ²⁶Emerick (2002) p 238
- ²⁷Grube, Dickie, Grabar, Sims, Lewcock, Jones, Petherbridge (1978) p.66
- ²⁸Grube et al., 1978 p. 20
- ²⁹Grube et. al., 1978 p. 27-40
- ³⁰Grube et. al., 1978 p. 27-40
- ³¹Usman, 2008
- ³²Syeed 2009 ISNA conference
- ³³Muhammad (personal communication March 2010)