



Ancestral Knowledge and American Muslims: Rooting Cultural Resistance in Islam

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We're anti-evil, anti-oppression, anti-lynching. You can't be anti- those things unless you're also anti- the oppressor and the lyncher. You can't be anti-slavery and pro-slavemaster; you can't be anti-crime and pro-criminal. In fact, Mr. Muhammad teaches that if the present generation of whites would study their own race in the light of true history, they would be anti-white themselves.

- Al-Hajj Malik El Shabazz (Malcolm X)

Introduction

As with many of Malcolm's statements before he left the Nation of Islam, most Muslims would find a way to extract the benefit of his words minus the Islamically objectionable portions and mention of Mr. Muhammad. Many Black American Muslims would find no objection to the substance of brother Malcolm's words. Many American Muslims who find their roots connected more directly to Muslim-majority countries might ponder what it meant for their existence and longevity in this racialized space. And many White Muslim converts might walk away perplexed, trying to decipher their own representation and entanglement in his words. We reflect more deeply on such communal differences in this article, but there is something deeply profound about what Malcolm has placed on full display—indeed, his ability to indict White America based on deep knowledge of how racial oppression operated in his era, his ability to disentangle and recombine White racial identity and technologies of Colonial oppression, and perhaps most astutely, and certainly most notably, his unabashed articulate critiques of White supremacy, are all indicative of the presence of what we will refer to as “Ancestral Knowledge.”

In this article, we discuss Ancestral Knowledge, and what it means for Muslims in the US. Generally speaking, **Ancestral knowledges** (AK) are systems of knowledge comprised of the ontologies, epistemologies, and written, oral, cultural ways of

knowing, and spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples. As we work to define and share examples of the use of AK, we first draw a brief portrait of aspects of knowledge production in the context of Colonization. Contextualizing this history is necessary because of the wretched history of Western European Colonization, and in particular, their inferiorization of all other knowledges by describing them as primitive, anti-modern, and eventually obscure and invisible. Indeed, this includes minoritized people who have been relocated through either Colonization or Enslavement. Here, we consider ways in which hegemonic, Eurocentric ontologies and epistemologies marginalize those of minoritized peoples.

As we push Ancestral Knowledge to the forefront of our own epistemological considerations and navigational needs, we use this article to emphasize several other points. One, that both the textual scriptures and historical practices within Islam have always maintained a deep tolerance, if not encouragement, of Ancestral Knowledge. Two, in the US, some public Muslim spaces (such as mosques and Islamic conferences) have been led by ethnocentrists (despite good intentions), who have been unable to understand (or unwilling to consider) how they hegemonize space by placing their own unique Ancestral Knowledges at the center of these spaces, generalizing the particular. So in much the same way that White racial knowledge was invisibilized and thus became normal or standard knowledge, immigrant-based Ancestral Knowledge entered and became the standard in those Muslims spaces. “This is how we were taught” comments were often productions of local knowledge, based on unique histories, yet have been passed off as “Islamic knowledge.” Here, we suggest that immigrant-based Ancestral Knowledge is in and of itself not a problem, so long as it is identified and localized as a particular type of Ancestral Knowledge that may or may not be useful or even noteworthy in diverse Muslim public spaces. And three, we note that at a basic level, the Ancestral Knowledge of Indigenous Americans (African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans) should be valued much more than they currently are in Muslim spaces. This can serve as a call to take a much deeper look at the community-based epistemologies and Ancestral knowledges that these Indigenous groups possess, and could help us navigate oppressive American arrangements —such as Coloniality, White supremacy, and

Islamophobia. This is not a suggestion to exoticize or even appropriate indigenous Ancestral Knowledge, but more to elevate tremendous yet mostly unrecognized sources that have historically allowed these communities to survive and thrive.

Cultural knowledge and lived experiences within Islam

Islam not only refutes any suggestion that diversity is a weakness, it encourages us as individuals and societies to tap into the greatest strengths that God has uniquely placed in a people. The Qur'an refers to diversity of language, skin color, and culture as a sign for people of knowledge.¹ Just as it encourages us to identify our unique personalities and excel therein,² it encourages nations and peoples to tap into their cultural and individual strengths and use them to attain the noble goals made pristine through Islam. We are to take those cultures and “get to know one another” in a way that is mutually beneficial.³ This is evident in the many books written by early Islamic scholars on the virtues of cultures and tribes under titles such as *The Virtues of the People of Greater Syria* by Ibn Taymiyyah⁴ and *Illuminating the Darkness: The Virtues of Black People and Ethiopia* by Ibn Al Jawzee.⁵

As Islam spread throughout the world, the Ummah was enriched through the various cultures it interacted with as Islam sought to enhance rather than erase the goodness of what was within those cultures. In that sense, Islam is like a filtration system with everything that it interacts with. The beneficial comes through and the harmful remains behind. Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah beautifully sums this up,

¹ The Qur'ān, Sūrat Ar-Rum 30:22.

² Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Nazir Khan, “Souls Assorted: An Islamic Theory of Spiritual Personality,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/zohair/souls-assorted-an-islamic-theory-of-spiritual-personality/>.

³ The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al-Hujurat 49:13.

⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, “Faḍā'il Wa Manāqib Al-Shām,” Tarīq al-Islām, May 12, 2012, <https://ar.islamway.net/article/10323>

⁵ Ibn al-Jawziyy, “Tanwīr Al-Ghabash Fī Faḍl Al-Sūdān Wa Al-Ḥabash,” Al-Maktaba al-shamila, 1998 1419, <http://shamela.ws/index.php/book/5748>.

writing, “For centuries, Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural expression with the universal norms of its sacred law. It struck a balance between temporal beauty and ageless truth and fanned a brilliant peacock’s tail of unity in diversity from the heart of China to the shores of the Atlantic...In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow.”⁶

When Salman the Persian embraced Islam, he wasn’t diminished in his cultural richness. He wasn’t Arabized or viewed as less because he was not Arab, nor was his culture fetishized in ways that brought no benefit to his non-Persian companions. Rather he was embraced in the fullness of his experiences and was invited to participate in maximizing the potential of this Ummah. When we think of embracing culture, perhaps we only think of music, clothing, and food. But Salman’s contribution was most notable in his suggesting a Persian tactic of building a ditch around the city of Madinah to protect it from the Makkan onslaught as his people used to do the same against the Romans.⁷ This suggests that the Prophet ﷺ and his companions valued Salman’s knowledge and lived experiences.

There are those who suggest that to engage anything beyond the Qur’an and Sunnah is to suggest that Islam as a religion or divine revelation is insufficient or incomplete. This assertion falls short in many respects. Firstly, the maxim in Islamic jurisprudence is that all things are permissible unless proven otherwise (except in creedal matters).⁸ Secondly, we are not suggesting that Islam is a religion of no solutions or frameworks but that the brilliance of Islam is that the frameworks don’t negate what benefits exist in other ideas so long as they do not

⁶ Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “Islam & The Cultural Imperative,” The Oasis Initiative, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/islam-the-cultural-imperative>.

⁷ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Salmān Al-Fārisī | Companion of Muḥammad,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Salman-al-Farisi>.

⁸ “Few Basic Principles of Fiqh (Jurisprudence) – Peace Propagation Center,” accessed February 20, 2019, <http://peacepropagation.com/few-basic-principles-of-fiqh-jurisprudence/>.

contradict what is established by divine sources. Al Hajj Malik Al Shabazz Malcolm X, for example, famously stated upon returning from the Hajj in 1964 that Islam had the solution to racism. That, however, did not stop him from continuing to act upon what he benefited from before he embarked on his journey that was still congruent with his Islamic orthodoxy and productive for his community. He didn't stop being African American. Malcolm found peace in the explicit anti-racism traditions and frameworks that did not need to be extrapolated out of ambiguous scripture on equality in other systems, yet he found success in implementing much of what was beneficial before and after he and his message were refined through the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Those who speak of the Qur'an and the Sunnah as only a set of laws that limit, rather than a source of ethics and values that empower us to grow ourselves and our societies to their maximum potential do a great injustice to the sources they claim to defend. Articulations that knowledge outside of strict text is of no benefit are not only incorrect and problematic, but even destructive. Traditionally, such views rob the history of Islam of the great systems of *Maqasid*, *Usul*, *Qawaa'id*, and *Ijtihad* that articulated the everlasting Macro goals of Islam in a way that could be executed with full potential at the Micro level given evolving contexts.

A contemporary example on education

This might be best understood by taking a contemporary issue that is ubiquitously discussed in the US, but generally not addressed by most US Muslim communities—the School-to-Prison-Pipeline (SPP). Briefly, the SPP is a phrase that refers to the systematic disciplining and eventually removal of Black, Latino, and Indigenous youth from school. They are disciplined—in both formal and informal ways—much more often than their White classmates who commit the same offenses.⁹ Because of the use of School Resource Officers (school-based police) and legal court citations, these school discipline practices have become an entry point for minoritized youth into the Prison-Industrial-Complex. Thus, the

⁹<http://www.national-consortium.org/~media/Microsites/Files/National%20Consortium/Conferences/2016/Materials/School-to-Prison-fact-sheet.ashx>

SPP is quickly becoming one of the greatest human rights injustices occurring in the US at this very moment—one that surely Muslims should condemn. By and large, Muslim leaders appear to be unaware of the SPP, its structures, nuances, and ramifications; if they are aware of it, they have been very silent. Yet, the US Department of Education and the federal Office of Civil Rights have found that this is a systemic and widespread problem, impacting the long-term life chances of millions of minoritized students. Moreover, neither “policies” or “laws” are the biggest causes of the SPP, nor have they contributed to reforms or fixes of the SPP. Rather, it is the practices of educators who really need reeducation in liberatory pedagogical practices, hegemonic epistemology, and in-service development that would give them the tools to accomplish this.

How is it that Islamic objectives are so emphatic about justice for the weak and the mandate to provide access to knowledge to all people, yet Muslims are ostensibly silent on one of *the* premier civil rights issues for young people of our time? While the macro commitment from Islam (i.e., the major objectives of Islamic Law such as preservation of intellect, wealth, and even humanity), would apply, at the micro-level, Ancestral Knowledge—a historically situated, embodied knowledge—has much to offer and could be tremendously beneficial to Muslims in the US. Blacks and Indigenous people in the US have used embodied knowledge—such as community-based resistances, which informed organizational systems and structures—for centuries to confront White supremacy. While there are plenty of Islamic ethics to draw from in addressing broader issues of oppression, how do we translate those ethics into specific mechanisms to lead schools, expose hegemony and oppression, reshift power, recenter minoritized student epistemology, and perhaps pass a few new policies. Most of what would need to happen in liberal democracies like the US will never be addressed through new policies or laws of any type. Most often, these are epistemological questions, where notions of oppressive and racializing discourse come into sharp focus.

Is Western knowledge sufficient?

Over the years, many Muslims have embedded themselves within various anti-oppression organizations. It is not uncommon to hear young Muslims say, “Well, since the Muslims are inactive on this issue, and since there is no relevant ‘Islamic knowledge,’ let me stand with one of the organizations already involved in fighting injustice.” Though we strongly encourage involvement on specific issues with organizations like the NAACP, the ACLU, American Immigration Council, and like organizations, many completely rely on Westernized approaches to addressing problems caused by Western colonial projects and give almost no attention to anything non-Western as a possible approach to remedying something such as the SPP. This is highly problematic and suggests to us that Muslims have no clear way of understanding our genius in fighting injustices, navigating contexts, and leading the way forward. Moreover, it suggests that the actual remedies of these Western-initiated problems can be addressed vis-à-vis Western critical approaches. Until now, this has not worked and a growing number of educators would actually welcome Ancestral Knowledges that found their beginnings in some Muslim communities (such as, those formed within Black proto-Islamic movements). It is here that we more closely examine the utility of Western knowledge, its move to inferiorize all non-Western and non-White knowledge (i.e., Ancestral Knowledge that many Muslims hold) and the role of power in privileging Western knowledge.

Is one culture superior?

Ancestral knowledge is deeply connected to power and, specifically, who has the power to put their knowledge forward as *standardized* knowledge. One example is how we conceptualize and talk about *culture*. In most of our minds, this comes down to food, language, and dress, and occasionally a concrete behavior that represents *culture*. For example, many Muslims discussing culture mention the hadith in which Umar رضي الله عنه moved to stop some of the Ethiopian companions from dancing with their spears in the presence of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم stopped Umar رضي الله عنه from intervening and allowed them to continue with

their dance and cultural activities.¹⁰ The lesson for most of us is that Umar رضي الله عنه and the Arabs do one thing, and the Africans do another, and let us all get along in the same space. But the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم was also creating a space that truly validated and embraced people in their cultures, placing them all on an equal spectrum. And he led by example himself صلى الله عليه وسلم when he attempted to speak different languages to the children from those varied communities and familiarized himself with their rich cultures. Just imagine if Muslim leaders in the US emphasized this as it pertains to power and were therefore willing to deal with the various types of hierarchies of power that exist in racialized and post-colonial spaces. Perhaps then we would not have the type of white/brown supremacy and ethnocentrism that we sometimes see in Muslim public spaces in the US today, even if it is entirely unintentional.

The only unquestioned power that should exist is the power of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and scholarship that interprets on that basis. However, assumptions about what is closer to the Qur'an and Sunnah are often based upon how familiar practices are to the dominant group in a Mosque who usually come from a Muslim-majority country. As Dr. Sherman Jackson writes, "Immigrant Islam embodies the habit of *universalizing the particular*. It enshrines the historically informed expressions of Islam in the modern Muslim world as the standard of normativeness for Muslims everywhere. In fact, it equates its *understanding* of Islam itself with a simple, unmediated *perception* of an undifferentiated ontological reality. On this approach, "true Islam" can only assume one form anywhere it goes. And in this process, Immigrant Islam's interpretations are effectively placed beyond critique via the tacit denial that they are in fact interpretations."¹¹ This makes it unable to transfer any form of "self-authentication to Blackamerican Muslims. As a result, the latter are forced to proceed without the power or possibility of self-authentication, which leaves them to process their

¹⁰ Bukhari (2901) and Muslim (893) narrate that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: Whilst the Abyssinians were playing with their spears in the presence of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), 'Umar came in, and he bent down to pick up some pebbles to throw at them, but he said: "Let them be, O 'Umar!"

¹¹ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12.

black, American reality through the prism of the real and/or imagined expectations of immigrant and overseas possessors of “true Islam.”¹²

Westernization and cultural epistemicide

Given the central role of Power in determining whose knowledge is perceived to be credible, another concept we need to briefly discuss before we get to ancestral knowledge is **Colonization**. It is *not* possible for us to properly value ancestral knowledge without deeply interrogating Westernization and the colonized and racialized context that intentionally and unintentionally suffocates ancestral knowledge, what some scholars refer to as Cultural Epistemicide,¹³ i.e., the systematic destruction of an indigenous knowledge base.

Walter Mignolo explains Westernization as the privileging and *canonization* of specific, Western knowledge and perspectives:¹⁴

- Knowledge is controlled by disavowing some, and privileging other, types of knowledge;
- The disavowal of non-western perspectives and epistemology has been engaged with widely across academia;^{15,16}
- This has meant the privileging of Western Epistemological constructs that construct and name certain cultures, identities, and people.

Before we dive into conversations about Ancestral Knowledge, it is important to understand why we often are not able to recognize AK and its value. Understanding colonization, in all its manifestations and continuously reproductive

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 92.

¹⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), ix–xiii.

¹⁵ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Dilemmas of Ethnic Studies in the United States: Between Liberal Multiculturalism, Identity Politics, Disciplinary Colonization, and Decolonial Epistemologies,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: X, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 81–90.

¹⁶ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century” XI, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 73–90.

occurrences, is absolutely crucial in understanding the context of colonial knowledge.

Settler colonialism is a type of colonialism that maintains a material, imperial authority and presence in a population that is not indigenous to the colonizer. For example, the French left Gabon and so while elements of Colonization remain, it is not a settler colonial society. However, Europeans never left the US, and so the US *is* still in that respect a settler colonial society. In such spaces, all forms of land, economic resources, intellectual resources, and most importantly, human bodies and capital, are situated to deliver all wealth to the Western, global Capitalist state. Sadly, there are some settler societies in which it is nearly impossible to clearly see a path back. Mechanics and technologies, like surveillance, encomienda or forced slavery, depopulation, physical hierarchies, schools, standardized tests, and pathways to assimilation are all used to maintain colonial State control. These can be taken up in future research studies but are beyond the scope of our engagement here.

Coloniality. Extending the conversation of colonialism and its contemporary impact can be illuminated with what Anibal Quijano¹⁷ and Walter Mignolo¹⁸ refer to as the *Coloniality of Power*, or simply, Coloniality. The concept of coloniality is undergirded by the interrelationship of European colonialisms' legacies, practices, social orders and forms of knowledge, and their modern impact in social and organizational practices and norms. Coloniality is a perspective that identifies the legacy of colonization in modern societies, which includes post-colonial forms of social discrimination that are prevalent and pervasive today. Coloniality conceptualizes that popular thought, literature, educational curricula, media and art, and even critical theory and thought (if you are not careful) are its derivatives.

Coloniality is conceptualized as permeating almost every single social system present in the US, including the organizing principles and leadership behaviors of

¹⁷ Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80.

¹⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: Coloniality of Power and de-Colonial Thinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 155–67.

most organizations, racial hierarchies in the US, and cultural systems that value Eurocentric hierarchies of economic and knowledge production and transmission. But why would we, as Muslims, accept this for ourselves? Should we not resist such oppression? Are we even aware that this is happening? How absurd is it for us to be putting forth our strongest effort on an issue such as Islamophobic bullying in school, to ignore our own knowledges and capacities on an issue only to end up fighting for another strand of the very thing we resist?

Many of the scholars that we are pulling from today, in particular Annibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo, discuss Coloniality in tandem with the concept of Modernity. According to Mignolo, coloniality emerged as a new structure of power as Europeans colonized the Americas and built on the ideas of Western civilization and modernity as the endpoints of historical time and Europe as the center of the world. Coloniality is the darker side of Western modernity, a complex matrix of power created and controlled by Western men and institutions from the Renaissance, then driven by “Christian” theology through the late twentieth century and the dictates of neoliberalism.¹⁹

What Mignolo is saying is this: conversations about why Muslims needed to be modern were directly entangled with the West’s need to define and control all subaltern people, including Muslims. “Modernity” requires this: give up everything that defines you if you want to be rational and ultimately successful in the world today. It is not just, or even primarily, about technological transformation. It’s epistemological, historical, and cultural. And so the process of characterizing Western civilization as modern, advanced, and progressive, while all others including Islam are somehow deficient, backward, and subhuman in some way led directly to particular hierarchies within Western spaces (and their global reach, even into the global South). Here are just a few examples of how this happened:

- **Orientalism** of Arabs and South Asians: decline, degradation, decadence, but at the same time loyalty underlain with treachery.²⁰

¹⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, 1 edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011).

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

- **Tropicalization** of people from the Caribbean: exotic, heathenish and relaxed, full and voluptuous, all in one.²¹
- **Primitivism** of people in Africa: savage, childlike, tribal, libidinous, irrational, fecund, close to nature, innocent, and clearly underdeveloped, cultural underdevelopment intertwined with danger, savagery, and irrational violence.²²

Whatever characterization needed to effectively colonize a people has always been deployed through media vehicles and education systems. So in the past, as Muslims have attempted to grapple with these realities, they have tended to rely on Qur'anic verses that deal with the People of the Book. The challenge is that Coloniality is a far more precise explanation of US foreign/colonial policy behaviors, than religion. The United States Government is directly responsible for the death of more than six African presidents/prime ministers; the United States Government is responsible for the removal of many dozens of World leaders, primarily non-Muslims. This is just on the African continent. The United States Government attempted to kill Fidel Castro between 100-200 times. This is an ongoing saga of Coloniality. So, by not using a verse about religious oppression in concert with other verses to explain our current context, much is lost. Therefore, Coloniality and global capitalist structures are oppressive not only toward Muslims, but toward everyone. In sum, we are not dealing with injustice here in the US because it is a "Christian" nation as much as we are because it is a Settler Colonial nation with ubiquitous structures of coloniality.

So here we are, not merely citizens of Colonial empires, as we are social and political agents of Coloniality. So how would we deal with oppressive systems that on the one hand cannot be explained through verses about Christianity, and are not **specifically** responded to through Islamic texts? Allah says:

²¹ Anshuman Prasad, *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 156–57.

²² Ibid., 155.

*We sent aforetime our messengers with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of Right and Wrong), that men may stand forth in justice.*²³

We turn to Qur’anic verses like this and many others like it that demonstrate a clear commitment to justice. Yet, if Muslims do not understand how uniquely US-style oppression, power, or privilege operate in the US, and thus likely are facilitators of it, how can they understand a modern phenomenon like the *School-to-Prison-Pipeline*? Moreover, if there are no specific Islamic texts about schooling or oppressive practices within school systems, are we not called by our religion to interrogate such a problem using our pristine Islamic ethics? It is here that we turn toward Ancestral Knowledge as a part of the solution.

Ancestral Knowledge

So just what is ancestral knowledge? Ancestral knowledge speaks to epistemologies, everything that a person carries with them, as they interpret the world. Discourses, literature, language, any readings, personal experiences with cops, movies, comic strips, gender, disability, and race, among literally hundreds of other things, all impact one’s epistemology. AK encompasses those age-old cultural practices; that sage wisdom; those idioms, lines of poetry, and even discourses, that have been used to uphold cultural, *and religious*, practices over centuries. Described as “backward” and discarded in favor of false promises of modernity, ancestral knowledge is co-constructed and reshaped in new lands and even in Western communities. In other words, ancestral knowledge, while informed by our ancestors, is a living knowledge: it is embodied within the people who carry it forward. It is an embodied knowledge that iteratively impacts our very ontological principles.

²³ The Qur’ān, Sūrat al-Ḥadīd 57:25.

So this need to excavate and reclaim our ancestral knowledges comes on the heels of centuries of erasure and smothering, stigmatizing and othering, and then invisibilizing the fact that this very epistemicide occurred. **Indeed, traditional Islamic knowledge informs and even in some instances, dictates, ancestral knowledge. And in all cases, it must regulate our ancestral knowledge.** So when Quraysh and the early Makkans invoked their ancestors as validators of their polytheism, that was challenged by divine revelation and the fact that their truest ancestral knowledge was in fact one of monotheism (i.e., Abraham and the intentions behind the original construction of the Kaaba). And some ancestral knowledges—ontologies and epistemologies—were deemed entirely incompatible with Islam, such as the pre-eternality of the world among the Greeks, the practice of fortune-telling via sooth-saying among the pagan Arabs, the practices of the occult/magic, etc.

The Prophet ﷺ, however, continued to cite poetry from the days of ignorance that contained great wisdom and that did not contradict divine sources. He also praised good examples of people from the past and encouraged tribes to channel their unique strengths through the filter of Islam to benefit the Muslim community. Islam has always allowed for the use of any type of knowledge, including ancestral knowledge, that is beneficial to us, as long as there are no specific regulations to ***not*** do so.

Ancestral knowledge has been neglected by different segments within the community for different reasons. Some segments seem to have been programmed to reject everything non-Western, critiquing first-generation immigrants exude a particular Muslim worldliness. At the other extreme, others hide within discourses of ‘tradition,’ rejecting any and every thing that they have not well studied and that does not fit perfectly in what they believe to be tradition. This approach assumes that Islamic tradition cannot engage current realities. But in this approach we are giving up much. In the US, when we reject ancestral knowledge, we are denying knowledge from legendary luminaries that could teach American Muslims much: from the great Hunkpapa Lakota leader, Sitting Bull, who mounted deep resistance to American Imperialism, to Frederick Douglass’ abolitionist articulations, to

Fannie Lou Hammers' organizing, to W. E. B. DuBois' willingness to dream about Negro art as he asked: "Suppose the fight for equality is won. He asks: "What do we want? What is the thing we are after?"

Thus, we believe that a re-identification and reclamation of ancestral knowledge is important because of our need to exist in this space with dignity, with safety, and with humanization. Ancestral knowledge has also been preserved and passed on by people who no longer live on their ancestral homeland. For example, as many Indigenous nations in the US were forced into other areas of the US, and as Africans were enslaved in the US and Latin America, they maintained varying levels of their ancestral knowledge, which also evolved and adapted to new environments. Indeed, ancestral knowledge is structured to push against hegemonic, Eurocentric epistemologies and has the potential to actually assist in returning us and others to the Islamic tradition in ways that will improve/authenticate/beautify our faith and equip us to survive the erasures and confusions of those same epistemologies.

Ancestral knowledge is transported, hybridized, and appropriated

Ancestral knowledges were often re-versioned and hybridized with the practices of other Indigenous communities, and even sometimes co-constructed with the Colonizers and Slave Owners.^{24,25} Moreover, Ancestral knowledges have been appropriated or outright plagiarized by Western Europeans.^{26,27} But at the same time, what Richard Wright would call the *Middle Ground*²⁸—or a type of hybridized, newly-constructed space wherein subaltern people become something

²⁴ Paul Gilroy, "To Be Real: The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture," in *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance* (Bay Press, 1995), 12–33.

²⁵ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁶ Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century" XI, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 73–90.

²⁷ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

²⁸ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2001), 373.

new—via appropriation, or resistance, or even assimilation—is possible. Ancestral knowledge comes in here, and helped people like Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali push forth something not previously found in Africa, nor America.—new forms of ancestral knowledge that ended up changing the world.

Centering ancestral knowledge: A centerpiece for all students

When considering Coloniality, “the dark side of Modernity,” and Ancestral knowledge, we need to be a bit forceful here. We must be willing to center ancestral knowledges not only as a way to resist oppression, but as a way to affirm ourselves, our epistemologies, and our worth in this space. For example, many educators understand types of Ancestral knowledge to be a subject within an elective class. Unfortunately, this understanding will continue to minoritize and exoticize Ancestral knowledge and rob us of the Africans’ and Arabs’ oral traditions housed in poetry, the memorization of the Qur’an and other mimetic approaches, rites of passage found in indigenous groups (both here in the US and in Africa), the definition of self through community empowerment found in subaltern people, etc. These are all ancestral knowledges with tremendous value, that are not merely pre-modern and exotic. Professor Christine Sleeter found that when New Zealand centered the Te Kotahitanga approach to schooling, with the premise that “what will work for Indigenous students works for everyone, but what works for ‘everyone’ does not necessarily work for Indigenous students,” all students, in particular the Indigenous but even Whites, grew and benefited.²⁹ Ancestral knowledge being centered can help humanize the descendants of colonizers and slaveholders which is beneficial to everyone.

Our Islam, our full experiences, and our full potential

²⁹ Christine E. Sleeter, *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present*, Social Fictions Series (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2015), 137.

As we close, let us return to our discussion on the School to Prison Pipeline. We mentioned that it is one of the most virulent types of oppression facing our young people today, and Muslims are largely silent about it. Most of us are unable to extract from our religion the relevant lessons for us to address what is arguably one of the worst crimes of our time. The SPP is not merely about policy and obviously cannot be addressed merely through policy. That first- and second-generation non-indigenous Muslims are often not impacted does not matter, per the verse about justice that we cited above. But thus far, as Muslims who rely on the sacred tradition and texts, we have nothing for these millions of oppressed folks whom we live with side-by-side.

Yet, we do have some traditions: African Americans have developed “Double consciousness” and “Black liberation theologies” and the “Nation of Islam” and “Black Lives Matter” and other forms of resistance which are unique epistemologies and forms of ancestral knowledge that were specifically developed to deal with the unique forms of oppression here. The question we must ask ourselves is do we only find within ourselves to critique this ancestral knowledge rather than offer any meaningful contributions or alternatives?

So how can we make the most of ancestral knowledge and lived experiences as committed American Muslims? To recap:

- Ancestral knowledge makes up the centerpiece of the epistemologies of Indigenous and Minoritized (including Muslim) students and to deny access to this is a deep form of oppression that continues to marginalize students in school.
- Based on Western European forms of colonization, schools in the US were designed to eradicate all types of ancestral knowledge in the past and to prioritize Western European, Christian, capitalist epistemologies.
- Scholars of Coloniality argue that this attempted eradication of Ancestral knowledge is built within the structures of society, community, organization, and school and will automatically reproduce itself. Therefore we must all take an anti-oppressive stance by not only

recognizing ancestral knowledge, but by promoting it and making it the centerpiece in how we lead, live, and engage.

- Ancestral knowledge has the power to contest racial hierarchies and to resist new hierarchies that can find their way into our existing spaces. For example, a predominance and preoccupation with political, cultural, and social issues cherished by wealthier immigrant communities should not dictate our overall strategies as a Muslim community. This is literally driving so many disenfranchised converts right back out of Islam as fast as they entered it. We can use religious texts, but also ancestral knowledges, to resist new types of hierarchies that help stratify US mosques. In no way does this suggest that we should be anti-immigrant or not make room to celebrate the beautiful cultures and experiences found in our diverse Muslim community. It simply means we should not privilege one over the other especially in the name of it being more Islamic when it's really just another expression or more expedient to one section of the community.
- From a political perspective, we must realize that some of the worst victims of issues like the SPP are actually Muslims, just not the ones who usually represent us in mainstream spaces or are included in our strategies. And the politics of uplifting the oppressed is an Islamic issue, whether the oppressed are indigenous or immigrants. This speaks to one of the bigger issues that comes from negating culture or the experiences of the indigenous. The ramifications of invisibilizing are not just seen in the cuisine of the Mosques in Ramadan but in the social and political agenda of the community. This isn't only about hurt feelings due to exclusion from spaces but about actual harm done to communities intentionally or unintentionally as a result of that exclusion.
- Ancestral knowledge is deeply ingrained within Indigenous, minoritized, people of color, but many of us do not know how to access this knowledge within our communities. And most unfortunately, some of us actually use languages of "Modernity" to push and critique all ancestral knowledge out of the Muslim public space, while at the same time others

of us act out our ancestral knowledge in hegemonic ways because they too cannot recognize it.

- Many of the Muslims who have migrated to the United States struggle with their own ancestral knowledge, and unintentionally colonize other spaces with ideals even inauthentic to them. The result is not just fair and lovely cream playing into misguided standards of beauty, but colonizer standards of civility and progress by which existing indigenous communities are judged.
- The call to empower through ancestral knowledge doesn't invalidate the immense heritage and experiences of our immigrant Muslim communities, nor should this be deemed an attack on them. The beneficial ancestral knowledge from those communities has led to major advancements in fields like education and medicine. Moreover, the emphasis on the building of Mosques, the consumption of halal food, and student organizing contribute to the strong identity of the community overall. Many of these things were based in resistance to occupations or attempted erasures of Muslims in the countries of origin of many Immigrant Muslim communities.
- The Eurocentric erasure of the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples and epistemologies is the same erasure that overtook Islamic discourse in Muslim-majority countries in the 18th century, forcing Muslims to operate with epistemological foundations that were incompatible with their own.
- The suggestion of all this is not that Islam is insufficient or should merely provide a language to other ways of thinking, but that of the brilliance of Islam is that it invites experiences and explorations while offering both paradigms and parameters that help us develop from our origins, through our experiences, to our final goal of pleasing the Most High.

Finally, we see an opportunity for ancestral knowledge to engage more deeply with traditional Islamic thought. Indeed, as Islam entered and intermeshed with civilizations across millions of square miles and hundreds of countries, it

eventually did come to speak to and within cultural knowledges and histories. Remember, ancestral knowledge is embodied and can thus engage dialectically with Islamic law, jurisprudence, and its general ethos. We have argued in this paper that ancestral knowledge is historically-informed and locally-contested cultural knowledge that local peoples have always used to navigate, understand, resist, and reproduce local contexts. To act as though Islam is blind to or does not embrace this is to leave off part of the historical Islamic tradition itself. The examples of this are plentiful in the biography of the Prophet ﷺ and thereafter without being specific to one geographical context. How rich, yet different, are the legacies of Andalus, Persia, Timbuktu, the Ottomans, and the Uzbeks?

So what does this mean specifically in the context of resistance and shared struggles? On this point, we return to Malcolm X, and an instance in which he was challenged by a friend and mentor, Dr. Said Ramadan, on whether his message was truly even Islamic after Malcolm embraced orthodoxy.

Said Ramadan:

*How could a man of your spirit, intellect, and worldwide outlook fail to see in Islam its main characteristic, from its earliest days, as a message that confirms beyond doubt the ethnological oneness and quality of all races, thus striking at the very root of the monstrosity of racism?*³⁰

Malcolm X:

My first responsibility is to my 22 million fellow black Americans who suffer the same indignities because of their color as I do. Much to my dismay, until now the Muslim world has seemed to ignore the problem of the Black American, and most Muslims who come here from the Muslim World have concentrated more effort in trying to convert white Americans than Black Americans. I should think the Muslim World would realize that the most fertile area for Islam in the West is the Black American. This in no way implies discrimination or racialism, but rather shows that we are intelligent

³⁰ Louis A. DeCaro, *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University, 1996), 255.

*enough to plant the good seed of Islam where it will grow best...later we can “doctor up” or fertilize the less fertile areas, but only after our crop is already well planted in the heart and mind of these Black Americans....If the Arab world fails to assert itself as the leader of the Muslims worldwide, other forces would rise to replace their power centers. ALLAH CAN EASILY DO THIS.*³¹

Malcolm loved the Muslims he met and benefited from around the world and actually publicly praised them. But privately he struggled to articulate both to Muslims worldwide and his fellow non-Muslims in the civil rights struggle at home how he saw no conflict in his identities as a Black American thought leader and a caller to Allah. Malcolm didn't see that being an orthodox Muslim erased his struggle against White supremacist structures that domestically harmed Black people at home and Muslims worldwide through colonialism. He also didn't see that his commitment to Dawah to Islam made him less sincere in his struggle for Black America as a whole. In fact, he sought to unite the plight of Africans against colonialism, the plight of Palestinians against Zionist occupation, the plight of Muslims against increasing imperialism, and the plight of African Americans here at home in forming a comprehensive struggle against political, economic, and cultural Western domination. Here we see the genius of Islam in generating the most refined version of Malcolm. Islam purified Malcolm of the disease of racism in his own heart, while offering him paradigms to fight the racism that had harmed him and his people his entire life, while expanding his struggle to people beyond the borders of his nation, while making space for him to continue to sharpen his specific mechanisms of struggle against the structures that continued to wreak havoc against his people here in the United States. Hence, the 1964 post-Hajj Malcolm could articulate the following two statements without paradox:

In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again – as I know now that some white people are truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man. The true Islam has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white

³¹ Ibid., 256.

people is as wrong as when whites made blanket indictments against blacks.

³²

*It isn't the American white man who is a racist, but it's the American political, economic and social atmosphere that nourishes a racist psychology in the white man.*³³

³² Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1st Ballantine Books hardcover ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 369.

³³ Ibid., 378.