



PRE-COLUMBIAN ISLAMIC PRESENCE IN THE AMERICAS

*By Dr. Yahia Zeghoudi Maître de Conférence Centre Universitaire de
Ghardaia*

Few scholars and ordinary Muslim people suspect the arrival of Muslims at the Americas a long time before the “discovery” of Christopher Columbus of the San Salvador Island in 1492. By the way, this island was called by the natives “Indians” *Guana Hani*, a *Mandinka* word meaning (الإخوان هاني). Probably, no one could have dreamt of the idea of a Muslim presence on the American continent. However, new theories based on archaeological findings tend to point in this direction. This means that Columbus was the “last” to arrive, and not the discoverer. Here below is evidence of this new tendency.

The oldest recorded Muslim presence in America dates back to AD 700-800 as proved by Barry Fell from the University of Harvard in his book *Saga America* (1980). He gave solid scientific evidence that Muslims from North and West Africa arrived to America centuries before Christopher Columbus. He discovered through archaeological findings that Muslims established schools at Valley of Fire, Allan Springs, Logomarsino, Keyhole, Canyon, Washoe and Hickison Summit Pass (Nevada), and at Mesa Verde (Colorado), Mimbres Valley (New Mexico) and Tipper Canoe (Indiana) dating back to the above-mentioned era. In the arid Western region of the USA, he found engravings on rocks that included Arabic texts, diagrams, and charts as remnants of the last surviving fragments of a Muslim system of elementary and high level schools.⁽¹⁾ Fell indicates that the Arabic of North Africa was used in teaching, and was

written in old *Kufic* Arabic scripts. The schools provided lessons in writing, reading, mathematics, arithmetic, religion, history, geography, astronomy, and sea navigation. Fell further indicates that the Muslim visitors of North America integrated with the natives and are now members of the communities of the Iroquois, Algonquin, Anasazi, Hohokam and Olmecs, etc. In addition, there are 484 names of villages, towns, cities, mountains, lakes, rivers...in the USA and 81 in Canada, which derived from Islamic and Arabic roots.⁽²⁾ All those places were named by natives before the arrival of Columbus. Barry Fell cites the following list of names such as Mecca -700 inhabitants-, Indiana, Makkah Indian tribe (Washington), Medina-2100 (Idaho), Medina-8500 (New York), Medina-1100, Hazen-5000 (North Dakota), Medina-17000/Medina-120000 (Ohio), Mahomet- 3200 (Illinois), Mona-1000 (Utah), Arva-700 (Ontario, Canada), etc.

As to the names of the Indian tribes, he says that many of them have Arabic and Islamic roots and origins such as Anasazi, Apache, Arawak, Arikana, Chavin, Cherokee, Cree, Hohokam, Hupa, Hopi, Makkah, Mahigan, Mohawk, Nazca, Zulu, Zuni, etc⁽³⁾.

There is also historical evidence that suggests that there was also contact between Muslims and Native Americans in the mid-tenth century. During the rule of the *Umayyad* Caliph Abdu-Rahman III (AD.929-961), Muslims of African origin sailed from the Spanish port of Delba (Palos) into the “ Ocean of darkness and fog,” as Muslims used to call the Atlantic Ocean. After a long absence, they returned carrying a lot of booty from a “ strange and curious land.”⁽⁴⁾ Another Muslim historian and geographer, Abu- Al-Hassan Ali Ibn Al-Hussein al-Masudi (AD. 871-957), relates in his book *The Meadows of Gold and Quarries of Jewels*⁽⁵⁾, that during the rule of the Muslim caliph of Spain Abdullah Ibn Mohammed (AD. 888-912), a Muslim navigator called Khashkhash Ibn Saeed Ibn Aswad, from Cortoba, Spain, sailed from Delba (Palos) in AD 889. He crossed the sea (later known as the Atlantic) and reached an unknown territory and returned with fabulous treasures.⁽⁶⁾ On the other hand, Al-Masudi drew a map of the world in which he referred to a large area in the Sea of Darkness and Fog as the unknown territory.

Other Muslim visits to America happened at intervals after that of the period A.D. 700-800. In this same document, Mroueh cites another Muslim historian by the name of Abu Bakr Ibn Umar Al-Gutiyya. The latter mentioned that during the rule of the Muslim caliph of Spain, Hisham II (A.D. 976-1009) a Muslim sailor from Granada, Spain, called Ibn Farrukh, sailed from Kadesh in February A.D. 999 into the Atlantic Ocean, made landfall in Gando in the Canary Islands where he visited King Guanariga. After that he went farther west and saw two islands and named them Capraria and Pluitana. His return to Spain was in May A.D. 999.

This is as concerns the earliest findings recording the Islamic presence in America between the eighth and tenth centuries.⁽⁷⁾ As to testimonies of the Islamic and Native American old contact, the following quotation of a native Indian of Islamic faith will be cited:

My name is Mahir Abdal-Razzaaq El and I am a Cherokee Blackfoot American Indian who is Muslim. I am known as Eagle Sun Walker. I serve as a Pipe Carrier Warrior for the Northeastern Band of Cherokee Indians in New York City. There are other Muslims in our group. For the most part, not many people are aware of the Native American contact with Islam that began over one thousand years ago by some of the early Muslim travelers who visited us. Some of these Muslim travelers ended up living among our people⁽⁸⁾.

After this introduction of himself, Mahir tells of his awareness that this page in the history of the United States is known only to few people. He reveals interesting information about Native Muslims, who were active in the American community between the 17th and 19th centuries:

For most Muslims and non-Muslims of today, this type of information is unknown and has never been mentioned in any of the history books. There are many documents, treaties, legislation and resolutions that were passed between 1600s and 1800s that show that Muslims were here and were very

active in the communities in which they lived. Treaties such as Peace and Friendship that was signed on the Delaware River in the year 1787 bear the signatures of Abdel- [H]akk and Muhammad Ibn Abdullah. This treaty details our continued right to exist as a community in the areas of commerce, maritime shipping, current form of government at that time which was in accordance with Islam.

Then in his article, he mentions that Native American Muslims had a role in the Constitution of the United States, which was drawn up as a substitution for the Articles of Confederation that failed to solidify the Union of the USA after the Revolution. He also tells that Arabic, Hebrew and Persian left their traces on the Native American languages:

According to a federal court case from the Continental Congress, we help put the breath of life into the newly framed constitution. All of the documents are presently in the National Archives as well as the Library of Congress. If you have access to records in the state of South Carolina, read the Moors Sundry Act of 1790. In a future article, Inshallah, I will go into more details about the various tribes, their languages; in which some are influenced by Arabic, Persian, Hebrew words. Almost all of the tribes vocabulary include the word Allah.

The Natives imitated the names of people, places, and even the 'Islamic' dress:

The traditional dress code for Indian women includes the kimah ⁽⁹⁾ and long dresses. For men, standard fare is turbans and long tops that come down to the knees. If you were to look at any of the old books on Cherokee clothing up to the time of 1832, you will see the men wearing turbans and the women wearing long head coverings. The last Cherokee chief who had a Muslim name was Ramadhan Ibn Wati of the Cherokees in 1866. Cities across the United States and Canada bear names that are of Indian and Islamic derivation. Have you ever wondered what the name Tallahassee means? It means that He Allah will deliver you sometime in the future ⁽¹⁰⁾.

As to the geographic explorations in the Atlantic Ocean made by Muslims, Al-Sharif Al-Idrissi (A.D. 1099 – 1166) the Muslim geographer

and cartographer wrote about them in his book *Excursion of the Longing One in Crossing Horizons*⁽¹¹⁾. He reported that a group of Muslim North African sailors sailed into the Sea of Darkness and Fog (the Atlantic) from Lisbon (Portugal) in an attempt to explore it and find its limits. After a time of sailing, they finally arrived at an island where they saw people and cultivated land. During the fourth day of their stay, the inhabitants brought them a translator, who spoke Arabic⁽¹²⁾. Also in the subject of explorations, Muhammad Abdullah Ahari⁽¹³⁾ mentioned that a Navigator of Christopher Columbus during the first exploratory voyage carried a document which told a travel narrative written by Portuguese Muslims, who had sailed to the New World in the 12th century. The author of the document was Al-Sharif Al-Idrissi who entitled it *The Sea of Tears*, and in it he described a voyage made by 80 Muhagharrun⁽¹⁴⁾. The latter lived in Lisbon during the reign of the *Murabit Emir*, Yusuf ibn Tashfin. They visited fourteen islands. When later traced, about six of these islands proved to be either in the Canary Islands or the Azores. However, the islands not traced could be in the Caribbean Sea.

As to Muslim explorations of the Atlantic Ocean and beyond in the twelfth century, a Chinese document known as the Sung Document⁽¹⁵⁾ records in A.D. 1178 the voyage of Muslim sailors to a land called in Chinese Mu-Lan-Pi (America).

Later in the 13th and 14th centuries, another Muslim navigator, Sheikh Zayn Eddine Ali ben Fadhel Al-Mazandarani, started his journey from Tarfaya, South Morocco, during the reign of Abu-Yakoub Sidi Youssef (A.D. 1286 – 1307). He crossed the Sea of Fog and Darkness and arrived at the Green Island in the Caribbean Sea in A.D. 1291 (690 of the Hegira)⁽¹⁶⁾.

Another Muslim historian, Chihab Ad-Dine Abu-l- Abbas Ahmad ben Fadhl Al-Umari (A.D. 1300-1384/700-786 HE), described in his book *The Pathways of Sights in the Provinces of Kingdoms*⁽¹⁷⁾ the voyages made by the *sultans* of Mali beyond the Sea of Fog and Darkness.⁽¹⁸⁾

The *Mandinka* monarchs of the West African Islamic empire of Mali contributed to the geographical explorations of the New World. The famous Sultan Mansu Kankan Musa (A.D. 1312-1337), on his way

to Mecca for the hajj in 1324 while transiting from Egypt, informed the scholars present at the court of the *Sultan An-Nasir Nasir Eddine Muhammad III* (AD. 1309-1340) in Cairo about his brother's expeditions. *Sultan Abu Bakari I* (A.D. 1285-1312), had made two trips across the Atlantic Ocean and that when he did not return from his second voyage of AD. 1311 to Timbuktu, he (Mansa Musa) became the sultan of Mali⁽¹⁹⁾. During the reign of the latter, explorations across the Atlantic Ocean continued. As anthropologically proven, the *Mandinkas* explored several parts of North America by using the Mississippi and other rivers for travelling. The writings left by the *Mandinkas* at Four Corners, Arizona, show that they had brought elephants from Africa to the area⁽²⁰⁾. To support this reasoning, Fareed Numan mentioned that in 1312 African Muslims (*Mandinkas*) arrived at the Gulf of Mexico in order to explore the American interior by using the Mississippi River for access. These explorers originated in Mali and West Africa.

On the other hand, Christopher Columbus and other Portuguese and Spanish explorers used geographical and navigational information gathered by Muslim traders to travel a distance of 2,400 kms across the Atlantic Ocean. The information and maps had been compiled by Muslim traders and Al-Masudi (A.D. 871-957) in his book *History of the World* from material gathered in Africa and Asia. Besides, as to the help that Columbus received from Muslims, his first expedition of 1492 included two captains of Muslim origin. The first was Martin Alonso Pinzon, who commanded the *Pinta* and the second was his brother Vicente Yañez Pinzon in the command of the *Niña*. The Pinzon brothers were rich ship outfitters, who also outfitted the *Santa Maria* for the historical voyage during which Columbus reached the Bahama Islands, believing he had reached India. They outfitted the ships at their own expense. In doing so, the Pinzon brothers were motivated by commercial reasons. As to their origin, they were related to the *Sultan Abuzayan Muhammad III* (A.D. 1362-1366), who ruled Morocco as one of the *Marinid* rulers (AD. 1196-1465)⁽²¹⁾.

More important as a proof of the precedence of Islamic presence over the European one, Christopher Columbus wrote in his journal that

on Monday, October 21, 1492, he saw a mosque on top of a beautiful mountain while his ship was sailing near Gibara on the north-east coast of Cuba⁽²²⁾. In fact, ruins of mosques and minarets bearing Arabic *Quranic* verses were also discovered in Cuba, Mexico, Texas and Nevada. Besides, when Columbus returned to the Caribbean for a second voyage⁽²³⁾, the Indians of Haiti (then called Hispanola) told him that black people had visited the area before him. As a proof, they presented him with a number of the spears that those people had left there. The tips of these weapons were in gold that the Indians called "Guanin," a word of West African origin meaning "gold alloy." However, the term had Arabic origin "*ghinaa*"⁽²⁴⁾ meaning "wealth." And when Columbus returned to Spain from this voyage, he brought with him the spears and had them tested. The result was that it proved to be 56.25% gold, 18.75% silver and 25% copper. This was the same ratio of the spear tips manufactured in the metal shops of Guinea.⁽²⁵⁾

On the third voyage of Columbus to America in 1498 he visited Trinidad. Later, he noticed in South America that the natives used colourful handkerchiefs that resembled the headdresses and loinclothes of Guinea. He referred to them as *Almayzars*,⁽²⁶⁾ which means in Arabic "wrapper", "cover," "apron" or "skirting."⁽²⁷⁾ These *almayzars* were the same as the ones the Moors (Spanish or North African Muslims) used to import from West Africa (Guinea) to Morocco, Spain and Portugal. Later, the Spanish conquistador of the Caribbean and Mexico, Hernando Cortés, wrote that the Indian women wore "long veils," and the men wore "breechcloth painted in the style of Moorish draperies."⁽²⁸⁾ In addition, Fernand Columbus, the son of Christopher Columbus, described the cotton garments worn by the natives as "breechclothes of the same design and cloth as the shawls worn by the Moorish women in Granada."

As another proof of the arrival of Muslims into America before Columbus, when the latter arrived in the Bahama Islands during his first voyage on October, 12th, 1492, he landed in a tiny island which he renamed San Salvador. The natives called this island by another name "Guanahani" of which the roots were *Mandinka* and Arabic. Guana is derived from Arabic "*Ikhwana*," which means "brothers" and "*Hani*" is

an Arabic proper noun, the name of a person. That is the name of the island stood for 'Hani Brothers.'⁽²⁹⁾ This clearly proves that Muslims had visited and left their impact on the San Salvador Island before Columbus.

At the same time, at the east of Pointe Cavinass as far as Cape Gracias A Dios, in Honduras, there existed a tribe of Muslim natives called '*Almamy*.' This word was of Arabic and *Mandinka* origin, standing for '*Al-Imam*,' that is the leader of the prayer or the chief of the community.

1-Richard, Brent TURNER, Islam in the African-American Experience, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997.

2- Ibid.

3-Ibid.

4-Youssef MROUEH, "Pre-Columbian Muslims in the Americas,"

<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/6443/America/columbian.htm>

See also <http://www.sunnah.org/history/>

5 - أبو الحسن علي ابن الحسين المسعودي (871-957) ، مروج الذهب ومعادن الجوهر.

6-MROUEH, op.cit.

7-The year of entry of Muslims to America was set at 1178 by Asma Gull Hasan. See Youssef MROUEH, "Pre-Columbian Muslims in the Americas,"

<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/6443/America/columbian.htm>

See also <http://www.sunnah.org/history/>

8-Mahir ABDAL-RAZZAAQ EL, "Digging for Red Roots." Article cited as taken from The Message, July 1996. See <http://www.islam101.com/history/cherokee.htm>

9- He probably refers here to Khimar (الخمير)

10-ABDAL-RAZZAAQ EL, op. cit.

11- الشريف الإدريسي، نزهة المشتاق في اختراق الآفاق.

12-MROUAH, op. cit.

13-Muhammed ABDULLAH AHARI, "The Islamic Community in the United States: Historical Development."

<http://www.sunnah.org/history/islamamr.htm>

14-Muhajjaroun (المهجرُون) means in English forced immigrants.

- 15- Fareed H. NUMAN, "American Muslim History: A Chronological Observation" (December 1992)
http://www.islam101.com/history/muslim_us_hist.html
- 16-MROUEH, op. cit.
- 17 شهاب الدين أبو العباس أحمد ابن فضل العمري، مسالك الأبصار في ممالك الأمصار.
- 18-MROUEH, op. cit.
- 19-Ibid.
- 20-Ibid.
- 21-MROUEH, op. cit.
- 22- Ibid.
- 23 - Columbus believed he had reached India, not a new continent and died with this belief.
- 24 - الغنى
- 25- MROUEH, op. cit.
- 26- المنزر-
- 27 -Ibid.
- 28 -Quoted in MROUEH, op. cit.
- 29 -Ibid.

Bibliography

- 1- Richard, Brent TURNER, Islam in the African-American Experience, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997.
- 2- Youssef MROUEH, "Pre-Columbian Muslims in the Americas,"
<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/6443/America/columbian.htm>
See also <http://www.sunnah.org/history/>
- 3- Mahir ABDAL-RAZZAAQ EL, "Digging for Red Roots." Article cited as taken from The Message, July 1996. See <http://www.islam101.com/history/cherokee.htm>
- 4- Muhammed ABDULLAH AHARI, "The Islamic Community in the United States: Historical Development."
<http://www.sunnah.org/history/islamamr.htm>
- 5- Fareed H. NUMAN, "American Muslim History: A Chronological Observation" (December 1992)
http://www.islam101.com/history/muslim_us_hist.html