

Jinn n' (No Freshly Squeezed) Juice: Interracial Tensions and Muslim Image-Making in the "Hood"

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Introduction

Liquor stores, or more colloquially "corner stores," in Detroit, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Washington, and other major metropolitan cities located in economically under-served, urban, majority-black neighborhoods have been purchased by Arab American and Arab immigrants over the last two decades. In order to understand the relationship of place to religion and race, I intend to examine the dynamics of the encounter between African-American Muslims and Arab and Arab-American Muslims (mostly Yemeni) at various liquor stores in Oakland, where, according to the US Census (2000), African Americans compose 64 percent of the population.

Complicated by an ethno-religious component, Yemeni Muslim liquor store ownership concentrated in Oakland's highest density, crime-ridden, black-dominant, and economically poorest neighborhoods, although aided by literature, requires a new theoretical arsenal for approaching the conflict. Little scholarly attention has been paid to the demographic shift in ownership and the resulting relations between the two groups. This essay is by no means an attempt to provide a comprehensive portrait or a theoretical foundation. Better described as a pilot study, my participant observations during

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on-site visits, interviews with Yemeni owners, Muslim and non-Muslim African-American food justice activists, and a prominent African-American Muslim scholar helped me begin to understand the complicated entanglement of race, religion, image-making, and place at the liquor store and beyond.

Attacks on two liquor stores in West Oakland (2005) by members from a Nation of Islam splinter group calling itself “Your Black Muslim Bakery” (YBMB) catapulted the discussion onto the national stage. A couple of days after the initial attacks, which included smashing glass coolers containing liquor, littering the floor with broken bottles of hard liquor, burning a store, and inquiries posed to the owners about their religion and the hypocrisy of selling alcohol, a proprietor was mysteriously abducted for the day. The event produced inquiry and public dialogue on the issue of Arab (mostly Yemeni) Muslim owned liquor stores in some of Oakland’s highest density, economically low resource, and black-dominant neighborhoods.

Although mainstream American Muslim leaders like Tony Muhammad (Nation of Islam),¹ Suleiman Ghali (Islamic Society of San Francisco),² and Zaytuna Institute scholars condemned the attacks, the incident opened up a debate about the immorality and religiously unethical economic exploitation of one group vis-à-vis another. This nationally publicized vigilantism brought the discourse of tensions, intra-faith relations, ethical Muslim behavior, the reputation of Muslims in the ‘hood, and individual and communal responsibility in American Islam to the forefront. Muslim ownership of such businesses transforms the historic position of African-American Muslims from being the guardians of the African-American community’s values and social upliftment to contributing to the unraveling of the community on account of a “presumably” shared religious affiliation with the Yemeni Muslim liquor storeowners.

Got Juice?

The violent insurrection, the blatantly illegal overconcentration of liquor stores, and the conspicuous absence of a full-service grocery store in West Oakland distinguishes Oakland from other major metropolitan urban sectors where Arabs dominate the liquor store industry and, consequently, further exacerbates racial and ethno-religious tension. Commenting on the attacks, African-American Muslim journalist Adisa Banjoko has no tolerance for such storeowners who, he states, “sell products to black people that they would never try to sell in their own countries.” From his own experience, Arab Muslims exercised little to no ethical standards, for they even sold

alcohol to minors to make a profit. Banjoko's anecdotal experience of such events is substantiated by a recent liquor license suspension.³ Issues like selling liquor to minors and more general concerns surrounding Arab Muslim ownership of *haram*, socioeconomically exploitative institutions became a hot topic on the blogosphere as a result of the much publicized "siege" on an Oakland liquor store referenced by Banjoko.

Black Muslim female blogger Margari Hill expresses another cause for concern, that of the limited interface between Arabs and African Americans, which can contribute to increased malevolence:

This economic exchange is one that also perpetuates bad relations between Arabs and African Americans. The liquor store interaction is often the only interaction Arabs have with African Americans. And in fact, many immigrant Muslims have never seen the other side of African American life, you know, the other 75% that is not under the poverty line. Likewise, many African Americans only experience of Arabs is the paranoid and often rude Arab liquor storeowner.⁴

Hill's experience is based on her role as a research assistant for food activist Natalie Bayton of Inner City Grocers in Oakland. Her work focused on introducing healthier alternatives to a community subjected to an illegal proliferation of liquor stores. As she explains: "You could go a mile on Macarthur and there is no grocery store. All you have are these liquor stores, with junk food and a limited amount of produce. All the spaces that could accommodate groceries are taken over by liquor stores."

The sheer oversaturation of liquor stores, an illegal presence that in Oakland totals 326, which is 54 over the number permitted by the law,⁵ distinguishes the Oakland case. Based on Assembly Bill 2897's newly established guidelines on issuing liquor licenses (1994-based on crime statistics, concentration of liquor stores as determined by census tract population), as of 2004, West Oakland was twenty-eight licenses over the limit determined by these ABC guidelines. Not so coincidentally, this high density of liquor stores is concentrated in the city's economically poorest neighborhoods.

Hill explained the reason for this: "In the 90s a lot of liquor stores in the Bay Area, gas stations were owned by Palestinians. And now, the small grocers there are part of a monopoly by Yemeni union grocers. And they don't sell any groceries. It's a lot of liquor stores." The food activist she worked for spoke of the competition she faced with these liquor stores and the frustrations of combating this monopoly on food sales in Oakland:

So for people who wanted to clean up the neighborhood, they discovered that the Yemeni grocers had a lot of political pull in Oakland. How are these liquor stores able to exist in such high density and it's against zoning laws? And you could go to nice neighborhoods and you won't see a liquor store in sight. A lot of it is political and institutional that was problematic about the amount of liquor stores, the lack of businesses that had an interest in developing the community.⁶

The "Yemeni union grocers," formally known as the "Yemeni Grocers Association," represents 250 to 300 Oakland business owners. In a January 10, 2006 Associated Press news story on the 2005 attacks, Mohamed Saleh Mohamed (president, Yemeni Grocers Association) argues in his much-vilified merchants' defense that "before Middle Eastern immigrants started buying corner stores in the early 1980s, they offered nothing but alcohol. The merchants expanded and began to sell more produce and other food."⁷ The overwhelmingly conspicuous ethnicization of the occupation, however, reconfigures the Yemeni Muslim into a convenient reprehensible figure in the community. Though difficult to determine the exact percentage, estimates on Yemeni ownership of liquor stores or "neighborhood markets" in Oakland range from anywhere between 67 to 90 percent.⁸ A short drive down one of West Oakland's streets visually vindicates these numbers, which Imam Zaid Shakir (professor, Zaytuna Institute) famously characterized as "a liquor store on every corner."⁹

A Ride on Jinn Street: Insight from Pilot Observations

On a short drive down Market Street in West Oakland, Nikki Henderson (executive director, Food Justice Organization People's Grocery) gave me a lesson on food politics in West Oakland. My educational tour began at an abandoned building in a strip mall. "You see that? That's where the only full-service market in West Oakland used to be." A couple blocks up, some hope bloomed in the form of a sizable uncultivated lot: "That's where the People's Grocery open-air market will be." People's Grocery, set to open in 2011, will distinguish itself from the all-organic and "health-conscious" offerings at the Mandela Parkway cooperative on Mandela Parkway and 7th Street, with a 40/60 percent formula of mainstream goods like "ketchup, Doritos, etc." mixed with organic and healthy options to attract local patronage. Just one block further, we saw the lighted signs of the speciously named "Ideal Market" and "Millennium Market" glowing brightly at 10:00 pm.

Prior to the “tour,” I traveled up from Southern California to Oakland to interview some of the store owners. This participant-observation and interview portion of my study highlighted the advantage attached to my ethno-religious and gender identity. Although potentially perilous, my positionality as an Arab-American Muslim woman traveling solo afforded me unparalleled access. Due to a shared linguistic (Arabic), national (pan-Arabism), and religious (Islam) kinship, and (I assume) a seemingly non-threatening gender presence, I found them put at ease and willing to confide in me rather than respond defensively. Previous to this study, I had become accustomed to the frequent practice of liquor store owners in Oakland offering to brew me some Arabic-style coffee upon learning of my ancestral heritage and ability to converse with them in Arabic. This noted advantage carried over to my extensive interviews with two Yemeni Muslim storeowners.

My first interview took place at “Uptown Market and Liquor,” located adjacent to Oakland’s Masjid al-Iman. Taking my time, I wandered the aisles and noted the stereotypical offerings: canned beans, soda, candy, frozen meals, chips, a row of fridges full of liquor, and a plentiful selection of cigarettes. Debating whether or not to buy something, I finally decided to do so, waited my turn in line, and then asked if I could interview him. He quickly obliged. As I stood on the other side of the counter, in between lulls of business transactions Mohammad told me how he came to this country, explained how he became involved in this business, spoke sorrowfully about his poor educational training, editorialized on Muslim community relations, and shared his spiritual commitment to Islam.

As I stepped away from the counter during business transactions, I observed the patrons’ purchases: flaming hot chips, zigzags, cans of beer, some hard liquor. Although jarring at times, I was more shocked by a strange owner-patron camaraderie. More than once, Mohammad forgave shortages in payment, and both owner and patron exchanged greetings either through handshakes or smiles. Based on anecdotal stories told to me by Oakland community members, this appeared to be an anomaly. Somewhere in the middle of the interview Mohammad offered me a drink. I declined his persistent offers. During an interrupted moment of conversation, I noticed a miniature fruit and vegetable cart close to the entrance that carried a paltry stock of produce. I wondered: “Is this how these businesses evade liquor store limits, by being classified as a ‘grocery stores’ because of some minimal requirement is fulfilled?” I never found the answer to my question. Upon his return to the interview, Mohammad told me how he had gotten out

of the business in the mid-nineties only to return in 2006 as a “temporary” favor to a friend. He explained that the business was an undesirable one to be in and spoke forcefully about his intention to escape the web of intricately laced social ills that had trapped him for a second time. The theme of “getting out” proved to be a popular desire and, as my next interview confirms, a realizable objective.

During my trip, the buzz in Oakland’s Muslim American community was about Nature’s Best Foods, a downtown organic food store owned by two Yemeni brothers that greets customers with a wall of plastic canisters of dried fruits, nuts, and grains. Further in are rows of organic-only fruits and vegetables, boxes of baklava and other Middle Eastern sweets, and “americana convenience store” staples such as soda and chips. But not so normal for Oakland, this Yemeni-owned store is completely alcohol free. The two Yemeni brothers who bought it in 2006 had grown up working their father’s liquor store for most of their lives; they turned this one into an organic, natural foods market.

When I entered the store on Sunday night close to closing time, Mohammad was unloading boxes of products as he checked inventory. He favored a game of devil’s advocate as I initially asked him about grievances I had heard from Muslim community members about Yemeni liquor store ownership. First, he privileged a supply and demand argument, claiming that if the community’s demand for liquor were not so high, then these businesses would fail on their own, as opposed to being on “every corner.” Echoing Saleh Mohamed (president, YGA), he added that liquor stores bought out by Yemenis in the 1980s and 1990s did not expand the number of liquor stores; they just transferred ownership. In regards to the “poor education” argument, he rhetorically asseverated: “Do you know the situation in Yemen? Yemenis are coming here with no education.”

After offering an analysis on how Yemeni Muslims rationalize owning such a business, he addressed the moral deterioration and abysmal lifestyle that comes with fast money. To demonstrate how *haram* becomes normalized, Mohammad picked up an all-natural Hansen’s soda can and said: “Let’s say you want to steal this. The first time you come into the store, you will be deliberating with your conscience for hours about whether or not to steal it. The second time, it becomes easier. And the third time and the time after that, you don’t even think about battling with notions of good and bad deeds.”¹⁰ He also explained that the liquor stores are an easy way to make “lawyer-like money” if your education and English-language skills are limited. “But like a lawyer,” he insisted, both practitioners are in the business of

“robbing people blind.” He stated that the liquor store business is no ideal life. After exiting the family business with his brother, he has no desire to go back because he now feels better about his relationship with Islam, the products he is selling, the shelves of all-natural hygiene products, the customers he is attracting, and the lifestyle afforded to him via this alcohol-free business.

The common theme of reconciliation of religious beliefs with divergent practices that emerged from my conversations, and complemented by new stories on Yemeni liquor store owners, were the following rationales: poor education, limited language ability, supply and demand, the “liquor stores were here before we bought them” argument, and the penetrating “want to get out” desire. Related to the last point, Dr. Mohammad Rajabally (president, Islamic Society of the East Bay) posited the idea of an Ex-Muslim Liquor Store Owners Association at a 2006 press conference called to protest the presence of liquor stores in Oakland.¹¹ His call for action substantiated a prevailing theme of either a desire to “get out” of the liquor store business or a concerted effort to convert liquor stores. Recently, stories of Yemeni Muslims getting out, converting, or introducing liquor-free alternatives are enjoying coverage by news engines.

The 2006 Organized Movement and Muslim Image Making

Imam Zaid Shakir, a prominent social justice activist and Zaytuna Institute scholar, was among the first to respond constructively to the 2005 attacks by organizing a coalition of concerned community members, organizers, and faith practitioners in a series of protests and civic actions. In January 2006, he spearheaded the “Coalition of Concerned Bay Area Muslims” movement to protest the presence of Muslim-owned liquor stores in Oakland. Members distributed Arabic- and English-language flyers with hadith on the prohibition of alcohol, a *jumu`ah* of consciousness raising on January 20, and a march proceeded by a press conference on January 28. This moment of crisis provided “a perfect juxtaposition to show prophetic religion that was embodied by Dr. King and Malcolm X and exploitative religion as embodied by the liquor store owners.”¹²

My interview with the imam began with his prior organizing experience of protesting liquor stores in New Haven, CT. Upon requesting his experiential wisdom in assessing the owners’ various rationales, he expressed little to no sympathy for the “liquor stores were here before we bought them”

argument: “As a Muslim, we don’t compare ourselves to non-Muslims. There is an entirely different system of ethics and morals that work for Muslims.” He also repudiated claims of poor education and limited language ability. In an interview with Anas Canon on Remarkable Current Radio, he proclaimed: “In Yemen, you had zero economic options. It was just be poor and die. That was it. You come to America; there are a thousand things you can do to make money lawfully.”

The next topic was the possible wedge created between African-American Muslims and Arab-American Muslims by these liquor stores. First, he resisted such categorical constructions of conflict, reminding me that Arab Americans were also active participants in the 2006 movement protesting liquor stores and of Arab-American store owners who repented. Second, he argued that, counter to my instinctual impulses to center the effects of this phenomenon on the relationship between African-American Muslims and Arab-American Muslims, concerns about the image-making of Muslims in non-Muslim, black urban Oakland took center stage:

There was a tradition in the African-American community of Muslims being people of service and a lot of that is attributed to the Nation of Islam ... Muslims were coming into the community to clean it up, uplift it up. To get people away from alcohol and pork, and to bring people fish, cleaning up drug addicts, reforming prostitutes, that was the perception of a Muslim, a Muslim as someone who was standing up for the rights of the community, epitomized by Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, who became the people’s champion. And now when you have Muslims coming in contributing to tearing down the community ... most of the murders that occur in Oakland occur in the immediate vicinity of liquor stores. And in addition to alcohol you have the pornography, you have the drug paraphernalia that is being sold, you even have drugs being sold out of a lot of these shops. So, to me it’s inexcusable.¹³

Shakir substantiated his point concerning this transformation of imagery with two examples: (1) The New Black Panther newspaper, which dedicated an issue to Arab-owned liquor stores. According to him, it displayed pictures of liquor store owners and represented them in a mocking fashion. Shakir also spoke of a prominent billboard in West Oakland condemning Arab liquor stores. A collective communal understanding of the Muslim’s positionality, specifically the Muslim’s exploitation of the ‘hood, was beginning to develop; and (2) Shortly after the 2006 movement, and his friends (wearing kufis and thus marking their Muslim-ness), were approached by several attendants who inquired at McClymdons High School’s famous

alumni versus varsity team basketball game and asked: “Are you all the Muslims that sell the liquor?” Given this ostensible reality, Arab Muslim liquor store ownership provides convenient negative stereotypes for black communities to consume of both Muslims and Arabs that correspond to a 9/11 narrative of heightened “fear” around these communities. Imam Shakir believes that Muslims should actively address this “duplicity” that finds Yemeni Muslims profiting at the expense of economically disadvantaged black people.

It’s 2010, Where Are We Now?

In 2007, the Oakland City Council passed an Assembly Bill that introduced new licensing restrictions on alcoholic beverages.¹⁴ As for activism, Imam Shakir’s organized movement has slowed down. He explained this by saying that although there were attempts to and interest in organizing immediately after the efforts of 2006, the organizers’ outside commitments limited the amount of time and energy they could give. Community members, however, continued to “push harder in terms of offering alternatives to some of the grocers and to network with Yemeni Imams to raise consciousness among the people” and are “still talking about plans to do things to make a difference.”

Although the situation appears bleak, there is hope. As noted, liquor store abandonment and conversion scenarios and desires by Yemeni Muslim liquor store owners to “get out” signals a shift. Local food activism and justice movements in Oakland, like that of the People’s Grocery and the Environmental Justice Institute, and even Chicago-based Inner-city Action Network’s (IMAN) “Muslim Run” campaign,¹⁵ have taken the lead in transforming the city corner contour by assisting conversion efforts or supporting the introduction of healthy food market alternatives. Also, according to City Attorney John Russo, the number of illegal (dubbed “nuisance”) liquor stores has fallen from seventy-four in 2004 to fifty-four in 2009.¹⁶ As efforts by the City of Oakland, initiated by Russo, to crack down on “nuisance” liquor stores chart a decline in illegal establishments, as individuals and community organizations help merchants convert their liquor stores, the materiality of the exploitation appears to be strongly engaged. Now, what of the ideological damage? Will any of these efforts have any influence on altering the non-Muslim African-Americans’ negative perception of Muslims? What must be done to repair the image of the Muslim on the corner, in the neighborhood, and beyond?

Endnotes

1. Shahed Amanullah, "Vigilantes in Oakland," *Altmuslim*, 1 Dec. 2005, www.altmuslim.com/a/a/print/2016/.
2. Cecily Burt, "Selling Liquor creates religious conflict for Muslims," *The Muslim News*, 12. Dec. 2005, www.muslimnews.co.uk/news/mews.php?article+10312.
3. Cecily Burt, "Oakland store's liquor license suspended for sales to minor," *InsideBayArea.com*, 19 Feb. 2008, www.insidebayarea.com/fdep?1204567526500.
4. <http://azizaizmargari.wordpress.com/2006/05/06/food-for-the-soul-and-muslim-owned-liquor-stores>.
5. City of Oakland, *City Attorney Report on Status of Liquor Stores in Oakland*, 18 Nov. 2009.
6. Author interview, Mar. 2008.
7. "Muslims clash over liquor stores: Black residents, Middle Eastern immigrants differ on view of alcohol sales," *The Associated Press*, 10 Jan. 2006, www.msnbc.ms.com/id/10774140/from/ET/print/1/displaymode/1098.
8. Almuslim.com and Imam Zaid Shakir (author's interview with the imam) put the figure at 80 percent, Pauline Bartolone in a story for NPR says that it is two-thirds, and Muslims for Healthy Communities organizer Zachary Twist claims "over 90 percent of Oakland's 350 liquor stores are owned or operated by Muslims" (Reginald James, "Will the Real Muslims Please Stand Up," *San Francisco Bayview*, 16 Feb. 2006. I have not been able to locate municipal figures on this number.
9. Recorded from the imam's conversation with Cornel West in 2006, heard on Anas Canon's interview with Imam Zaid Shakir on Remarkable Current radio on 9 Jan. 2006 and in Pauline Bartolone's story for NPR.
10. I am adumbrating this part of the conversation and not directly quoting, as his explanation was much longer.
11. James, "Will the Real Muslims."
12. Anas Canon interview with Imam Zaid Shakir.
13. Author interview with Imam Zaid Shakir, 12 Mar. 2010.
14. "Resolution in Support of AB 960 (Hancock) Liquor Store Amortization Bill," *Oakland City Council*, 3 May 2007.
15. For more information on IMAN's "Muslim Run" campaign, please refer to www.imacentral.org/muslimrun.html.
16. City Attorney John Russo's Report on the *Status of Liquor Stores in Oakland*, Oakland Planning Commission, 18 Nov. 2009.