

AsSalaam Alaikum!!!

I just read this over the weekend. I was given a few old copies of Islamic Horizons and what I am about to upload for you to read is the story of Muslims in America prior to the coming of Columbus and the Pilgrims. This article is from *Islamic Horizons* Nov/Dec 1994

## ***The Melungeons: An Untold Story of Ethnic Cleansing in America*** **By Brent Kennedy**

Perhaps Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln, was Melungeon. It somehow seems fitting that one of America's greatest Presidents should be of mixed race and probable Muslim heritage. But who are the *Melungeons*?

Historical records document that from 1492 through the early 1600s an estimated 500,000 Jews and Muslims were exiled from Spain and Portugal through a religious witch-hunt known as the Spanish Inquisition. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim exiles escaped to their ancestral homelands of Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. In fact, the well-known Barbary Coast Pirates of North Africa sprang from this group. They along with their Turkish compatriots, were renowned for their seagoing exploits as they sought revenge against the Spanish and Portuguese in ferocious Mediterranean sea battles.

Of course, they didn't always win: Those pirates unfortunate enough to lose at sea often ended up as galley slaves beneath the creaking decks of Spanish and Portuguese ships bound for the new World. Ironically, slaves of the Christians once again.

Other Muslims-Berbers in particular-Moriscos they were called made their way to the Canary Islands, India, France and other countries. And interestingly enough, where these exiled Berbers went, they identified themselves as "Portuguese," even if they had originated in Spain. In fact, the term "Portuguese," became almost synonymous for both the Muslims and the Jews who had been exiled during the Inquisition.

Finally, as the Inquisition grew in power and severity, even christianized Moors and Jews were forced into exile. These "*Conversos*" the name given to both Muslims and Jewish converts were not trusted by either the Church or the government, and probably with good reason, since most had converted to Catholicism only to avoid the death sentence.

The Spanish Inquisition, horrible as it was, accomplished something of great historical value for Islam. Even though Western historians have generally ignored the evidence, there is little doubt that Muslims played an early and perhaps the earliest role in the permanent settlement of this nation. And there is little doubt that the Inquisition with all its agonies drove Spanish and Portuguese Muslims toward the New World.

While American school children learn of Columbus's role in the discovery of the New World, they aren't told the entire story. For example, Columbus employed both Moorish and Spanish sailors and himself may have been Jewish. On his fourth voyage in 1502 he records two important discoveries: First, on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, he discovered an iron pot and an old ship's mast preserved in an Indian hut. He and his crew determined that these artifacts had come from the Canary islands. The Canaries, a Portuguese possession, had been a favorite dumping ground for *Conversos* of Muslim Berber origin.

Second, on July 31, 1502, came an even more extraordinary discovery. Off the island of Jamaica, Columbus encountered strange people on a strange ship that western historians have generally considered to be Mayan Indians.

This ship was forty feet long with a diameter of eight feet, and had a shaded pavilion in the center. From a distance, Columbus thought it to be uncannily like the Moorish galleys he had so often seen in the Mediterranean. There were approximately forty men and women on this galley, and unlike the Jamaican Indians, these people wore clothing: sleeveless shirts with showy colors and designs like those Columbus had seen, in his own words, in Muslim Granada.

These so-called Mayan Indians carried a cargo of tools, copper implements and forges for working copper. But perhaps Columbus's striking observation was that the women aboard this galley "covered their faces like the women of Granada." Were these truly Mayan Indians? Or simply one more case of biased historians refusing to accept the fact that Muslims could have reached the New World before Columbus? Columbus certainly considered the possibility.

In 1527, the first land crossing of the US by a non-Native American most likely was achieved by Azemmouri, a Moroccan Berber, a Muslim. Originally a member of an expedition of 300 Spaniards, only Azemmouri and three of his comrades survived this eleven year, 5,000 mile trek from Florida to the West Coast and back to Texas. He was the first explorer to enter a Pueblo Indian village, and the story of his daring exploits make for fascinating reading. Curiously, Azemmouri is never mentioned in American history books.

The establishment of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 was indeed an important event in American history. But it was by no means the first European settlement in the New World. The Spanish established Santa Elena, South Carolina in 1566, forty years before Jamestown. The colony thrived for more than twenty years, until it was overrun by the English in 1587. But since the English won the battle for this Nation, Santa Elena was conveniently left out of American history books.

What happened to the survivors of Santa Elena, and who were they? Their identity is important to understanding the hidden role played by Islam in the shaping of American nation. Many of the Santa Elena colonists were converted Muslims and Jews, or *Conversos*. In Spain the Muslims were known as *Mudajjan*, a word probably related to the term *Melungeon*. (my input is that the word *Mudajjan*, is a form of Mujahideen, ) Ethnically, many of the Santa Elena colonists were Berber Muslims and Sephardic Jews, recruited by the Portuguese Captain Joao Pardo from the heavily Berber Galician Mountains of Northern Portugal in 1567 -less than one year before the Inquisition kicked into high gear against the Muslims.

When Santa Elena fell, its inhabitants- including its once again practicing Jews and Muslims- escaped into the hinterlands, making their way to the mountains of North Carolina. And there they survived, intermarrying to some degree with Native Americans, eventually merging with a second group arriving on American shores in, ironically 1587- the same year Santa Elena fell.

North African Berbers and Turks captured in the Mediterranean by the Spanish and Portuguese were regularly used as galley slaves in ships crossing the Atlantic. Once in the new World, these Muslim captives were assigned to slave labor on the sugar plantations and in the mining operations of, among other places, Cuba and Brazil.

In 1586, the English pirate, Sir Francis Drake, commanding thirty English ships, made a daring raid against his Spanish and Portuguese enemies on the coast of Brazil. During this raid, Drake liberated some 400 Portuguese and Spanish held prisoners, including an estimated 300 Moorish and Turkish galley slaves Muslims captured in Mediterranean sea battles, as well as several dozen South American Indians, a smaller number of West African Muslims, and a few Portuguese soldiers. Drake had planned to arm and release the Turks and Africans on Cuba, to serve as a stronghold against the Spanish- but heavy storms forced him to continue up the coast to North Carolina.

There, on Roanoke Island, he was besieged by stranded English settlers pleading for a ride home to England. The English colony of Ralph B Lane had enough of the New World and wanted to go home. to fulfill their wish, Drake had to make room for them on his already crowded ships. According to English records, only 100 Turks were taken back to England where they were ransomed

to the Turkish dominions. there's no further mention of the remaining 200 Moors and Turks, the West Africans the Portuguese Soldiers, and the South American Indians by Drake, and records show that Sir Walter Raleigh, who visited the Island two weeks later, found no trace of them. Where did they go?

Research indicates that Drake left them behind, assuring that he or someone would be back for them. But that was no guarantee of safety from the pursuing Spanish or Portuguese. On Roanoke Island they were little more than sitting ducks. There is little doubt that they made their way the short distance to the mainland, probably utilizing the small boats left behind by the English, and then traveled steadily inland. Along the way they too intermarried with Native Americans, mostly Powhatan, Pamunkey, Nansemond, and Hatteras.

Within the next decade or so they encountered the remnants of the Santa Elena colony, many of whom shared their Muslim heritage. And there, thousands of miles from their homelands, these two surviving groups became one people. Christians, Jews and Muslims- literally, the People of the Book- living and worshipping the God of Abraham together.

In 1654, the English explorers learned from southeastern Indians of a colony of bearded people wearing European clothing, living in cabins smelting silver, and dropping to their knees many times daily, wherever they might be. A people who did not speak English, but claimed to be "Portyghee"

In the mid 1600's there were people living among the Powhatans and related tribes of eastern Virginia and North Carolina who were described as dark like Indians, but called "Portugal's" A similar people in South Carolina called themselves Turks. The early 17th Century Powhatan Indian description of Heaven is nearly word for word the description found in the Holy Quran.

In the 1690's French explorers reported finding "Christianized Moors" in the Carolina mountains. When the first English arrived, in the mid-1700's, large colonies of the so-called "Melungeons" were already well established in the Tennessee and Carolina mountains. And in broken Elizabethan English they called themselves "Portyghee" or by the more mysterious term "Melungeon".

Tennessee Governor John Sevier records a 1784 encounter in what is now western North Carolina with a dark-skinned, reddish-brown complexioned people supposed to be of Moorish descent who claim to be Portuguese.

In east Tennessee in the late 1700's Jonathan Swift, an Englishman married to a Melungeon woman utilized Melungeon men in his own silver mining operations. His dark-skinned companions were known as the "Meccan Indians"

Over the years, as growing numbers of Anglo settlers swept upon them and around them the Melungeons were pushed higher and higher into the mountains. and their claims of Portuguese and Melungeon heritage were increasingly ridiculed. Even the word "Melungeon" became a most disparaging term. In fact, to be legally classified as a Melungeon meant, in the words of one journalist, to be "nobody at all"

The Melungeons, pushed off their lands, denied their rights, often murdered, always mistreated, became an embittered and nearly defeated people. Over the ensuing decades, in a vain effort to fit in with their Anglo neighbors they lost their heritage, their culture, their names and their original religion but not their genetic structure.

Perhaps the most stunning evidence is the gene frequency research conducted in 1990 by Dr. James Guthrie, who performed a reanalysis of 177 Melungeon blood samples taken in 1969 in east Tennessee and southwest Virginia. Dr. Guthrie compared the frequency of certain genes within the Melungeon sample to the known genetic make-up of nearly 200 other world population groups. His finding indicated no significant differences between the Melungeons people of east Tennessee and southwest Virginia, and the people of North Africa, especially Morocco, Algeria and Libya, the Galician mountains of Spain and Portugal, Iraq, Cyprus, Malta, the Canary Islands, extreme southern Italy, and most interesting certain South American Indians and last but not least the Turks.

Can it be pure coincidence that these gene frequency comparisons match up so perfectly with those populations theorized to be the source of the Melungeons? Can this sort of coincidence truly exist? There are also a number of medical conditions associated with the Melungeon people, e.g. sarcoidosis, a debilitating and sometimes fatal disease which is primarily a disease of Arabic, North African and Portuguese people with links to the Canary Island. In this country It's most common among Caucasian Americans of Melungeon descent and AfricanAmericans with southeastern roots. Both groups undoubtedly share the same Mediterranean and Middle Eastern gene pool. There is strong evidence that Columbus himself suffered from sarcoidosis. And there are other genetically related illnesses as well. Familial Mediterranean Fever, thalassemia, and Machado-Joseph Disease (also known as Azorean Disease) are all strong indicators that Melungeons are indeed of mixed Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, North African and African descent.

Even if historians never took seriously the Melungeon claim to be Portuguese or Moorish, the medical and genetic work cannot be so easily dismissed.

What can the long standing mystery word "Melungeon" possibly mean? It was used by Spanish and Portuguese Berbers to describe themselves. But now there is yet another hint, further substantiating a Muslim origin. There are two Turkish words; "Melon" meaning cursed or damned, and "Can" meaning "life" or "soul." Used together these words pronounced "Melungeon" translate as "one whose life or soul has been cursed" Which would seem quite appropriate for 200 Muslim Turks an ocean away from their loved ones and their country.

The descendants of the Melungeon people are everywhere, especially those who have ancestors from the Southeastern US, of any race, some with the following surnames:

Adams, Adkins, Bell, Bennett, Berry, Bowling, Chavis, Coleman, Collins, Gibson, Goins, Hall, Jackson, Lopes, Moore, Mullins, Nash, Robinson, Sexton and Williams.

As a result of continuing research, several American celebrities have recently discovered their Melungeon roots.

The Melungeon researchers are supported by grants from the governments of Portugal, Morocco and especially Turkey. The Turkish are providing Arabic-reading scholars to translate records from the Ottoman Empire.

Many Melungeons are excited to learn, though they themselves are Christians, that their ancestors were Muslims and what they accomplished. This realization puts into better focus the prejudices that their people have suffered, not only the older members of their families, but still living ones. A Melungeon lady suffering because of the dark color of her skin, or a Melungeon male being attacked by two men in Blacksburg Virginia, in 1980 because they thought he was Iranian, or another being detained as a suspected Palestinian at an Israeli border crossing while visiting the Holy Land with his family. All these things have impact, and point out the insanity of prejudice based on one's physical characteristics. The Melungeons were Americans and Christians as well, and even thought they were ScotsIrish. But it didn't matter because the rest of the World was caught up in its preset prejudices.

The Melungeons experience shows that even if kinship may not be seen on the surface, it's there.

The Melungeons victims of an early form of ethnic cleansing on our own shores are the ancestors of a significant number of present day Americans. Americans who may not know that they are descended from Muslims and Jews, Arabs, Berbers, Africans, Native Americans, Portuguese and Spanish. And when people maliciously target any religion, racial or ethnic group that is different from what they perceive themselves to be, they are truly hurting themselves. Racial and religious prejudice is nothing more than selfmutilation. Humankind are all not just figuratively-but literally- brothers and sister. Not just in God's eyes, but in true family kinship as well

The Melungeons, thought most today are Christians, are the living legacy of Islam's first wave of immigration to the New World.

***Brent Kennedy author of The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People  
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