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Review: Indianapolis Imam Warith Deen Muhammad Community Collection

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Project

Indianapolis Imam Warith Deen Muhammad Community Collection

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Project URL

<http://www.ulib.iupui.edu/collections/IWDC>

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Project Overview

Edward Curtis IV*Description*

The Indianapolis Imam Warith Deen Muhammad Community collection documents the life of an African American Muslim community that has been part of Indianapolis since the 1950s. Established as “Muhammad’s Mosque” on Indiana Avenue, the community was first aligned with the teachings of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad and then, after 1975, with Elijah Muhammad’s son and heir, Warith Deen Muhammad, better known as W. Deen Mohammed. Now called the Nur Allah (Light of God) Islamic Center, this congregation has become known in central Indiana for its commitment to civic engagement and interfaith activities. The collection documents its members’ involvement in public life while also shedding light on the congregation’s religious activities.

The project is the result of a partnership between IUPUI and the Nur Allah Islamic Center. One of its contributions to digital humanities is its careful methodology of and best practices in community-based research. Embarking on the project over a year ago, our first priority was to make sure that Nur Allah’s members were the ones deciding what would go into the archive. The whole point of the project was for the community to tell the story of its own Muslim American journey, to share its struggles and celebrate its successes.

Team

Edward Curtis, an expert on Islam in America and author or editor of 11 books on the topic, initially proposed and offered funding for the project. A committee of community members, led by Imam Michael Saahir, then worked closely with Jenny Johnson and her team at IUPUI’s Center for Digital

Scholarship to collect, scan, and label all items in the archive. The most important voice in the process was that of community members, who were making the decisions about what was valuable to preserve and share.

IUPUI's digital librarians made clear from the beginning that this was the community's project, not theirs. After initial meetings at the library, the Nur-Allah Islamic Community hosted a community forum at the mosque with library staff. Members wanted to know who would be in charge of labeling the items—that is, who would provide the metadata. In all cases, it was explained, the donor would. In practice, this meant that those who donated hundreds of items ended up spending significant time working in the library with IUPUI staff. The community also wanted to know how long it would take the library to make digital scans of their valuable items, and we established a process for making sure that items would be scanned quickly and then returned to their owner. A committee of several community members was formed and frequently met to take stock of our progress and to gather and deliver items for digitization. We talked for a long time about what we should name the archive. We also openly discussed the challenge of sharing sensitive information, and sometimes went item-by-item as we figured out the ethical implications of our actions. It helped that the IUPUI library and one of our members, Judge David Shaheed, brought a lot of experience and wisdom to the table.

Audience and Contribution

The primary audience is, first, Muslim Americans interested in their own history and, second, scholars of Islam in America. Other audiences include scholars of American studies, U.S. history, Black studies, Islamic studies, and Indiana history. The primary contribution is to make available the voices of Muslim Americans who are (1) entirely missing from existing archives and (2) almost silent in scholarship.

Existing scholarship on African Americans Muslims, especially on W. Deen Mohammed's community, often focuses on Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Washington, DC, and Boston. Indianapolis is absent. The existence of this archive complements efforts underway to make primary sources needed to understand the activities of members—rather than movement leaders—available in digital form. These include the work of scholars such as Zaheer Ali of the Brooklyn Historical Society, who is directing “Muslims in Brooklyn”; Abbas Barzegar of the Council of American-Islamic Relations, who has launched the [After Malcolm](#) digital project to document Muslim American history after 1965, with the Ali Vural Ak Center at George Mason University; Kayla Wheeler of Grand Valley State University and Zaid Adhami of Williams College, who are working to preserve Muslim history in the Boston area; and Harold Morales in Baltimore and Katie Merriman in Harlem, New York. Only recently have such sources been digitized and made available on the web, and this archive is one of the largest, if not the largest, yet published.

Project Review

Justin Parrott

The newly digitized Indianapolis Imam Warith Deen Muhammad Community collection is a significant contribution to a growing body of “community-based research” projects. In partnership with the Nur Allah Islamic Center, formerly known as “Muhammad’s Mosque,” librarians from IUPUI’s Center for Digital Scholarship facilitated collecting, scanning, labeling, and providing access for 1,334 items (at the time of this publication) selected by community members. The result is a unique digital repository of letters, pictures, fliers, newspaper clippings, mosque newsletters, and other objects that tell the story of this faith-based community that has been active in Indianapolis since the 1950s.

Imam Warith Deen Muhammad (d. 2008), also spelled Mohammed, was the son and heir of Elijah Muhammad, the first leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a black nationalist movement. After the death of his father in 1975, the Imam steered the community he inherited away from the radical political orientation of the NOI and towards a more mainstream, spiritually-driven form of Sunni Islam. “My father was a great social reformer. But when I came in, all I cared about was the soul,” the Imam reportedly said.^[1] Items in the digital archive range from 1958 to the near present. Researchers of Black Muslims and Islam in America can now access a number of primary sources that document the community.

The earliest documents from the NOI-era include photos and letter by members, including Elijah Muhammad himself. Perhaps the most interesting set of objects is the Masjid Muhammad newsletter, which has been preserved from 1979 to 1983. These newsletters provide a fascinating look at the community’s activity during this critical phase of transition as Imam W. Deen Mohammed took over leadership. Several items record the community’s current activities, including the annual Parents Appreciation Banquet, Martin Luther King Jr. tributes, and interfaith events. Background familiarity with the community and its history is necessary to make sense of some of the items, as there is limited contextualization.

The project is hosted using OCLC’s CONTENTdm as a sub-collection alongside several other IUPUI collections. This is an industry-standard and high-quality content management system (CMS) in the field of digital humanities. The interface is fairly easy to use, but users will need to become accustomed to the particulars of the navigation scheme. Returning to the main browsing page from an item via the breadcrumb feature, for instance, requires two clicks through a landing page, which may not be intuitive to some users. These minor issues do not detract from the general value of the project.

As a community-based research project, metadata was supplied by the donors themselves. Text-based items have been transcribed for full-text searching. These search terms are highlighted on the digital

image itself, an excellent feature. Dates are not standardized by year, which renders the left-side hyperlink faceting less effective. This can make research a little challenging, as it is more difficult to narrow searches by time period or find keywords consistently applied across the collection. Moving forward, the project team could assist community members with best metadata practices in relation to the CMS, using previous IUPUI projects as an example. It is essential to maintain the autonomy of the community's intellectual content and purpose, of course, but librarians can suggest ways to improve the formatting of metadata for the CMS.

Overall, the Imam Warith Deen Muhammad Community collection achieves its stated goal of supporting Muslim American voices and enriching the digital landscape of resources about Islam in America. It compliments other archives through its specific focus on Indianapolis' community-members, whereas other projects have focused on movement leaders in other locations. The collection will also be of interest, by interdisciplinary extension, to researchers of U.S. history, Indiana history, and African American studies.

[1] Don Terry, "W. DEEN MOHAMMED: A leap of faith." *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 20, 2002. Accessed Feb. 19, 2020: www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-021020-mohammedprofile-story.html