

# İslam in Latin America: Beginning and Continuation of a Migration

## *Latin Amerika'da İslam: Göçlerin Başlangıcı ve Devam Etmesi*

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**Abstract:** During migration individuals or groups are displaced geographically their place of living for economic or social reasons. America is one continent which was conquered and then formed by immigrants from every other continent. After colonization and its migrations Latin America was enriched with multiracial and multicultural population. Furthermore, there is one immigrant that is not well known, has been lost during the history and in the present time, is opening a new opportunity in Latin America which is Islam. On the other hand, due to lack of historical resources the manifestations and how Islam arrived to Latin America is not clear, not uniform. This paper brings an idea of how after the discovery and formation of the American continent and its semi continent Latin America, Islam became present. There were found three common stages which were: slavery, colonial migration and postcolonial migration. Through the paper those stages were quite described to light up how Islam was born or how developed in this land. It is interesting to observe how Islam could help or enriched Latin America as a multicultural and multiracial and how this land could keep evolving and developing.

**Keywords:** İslam in Latin America, Arap Migration to Latin America, Turks in Latin America, Turk Migration to Latin America, Ottomans in Latin America

**Öz:** Göç sırasında bireyler ve gruplar farklı ekonomik ve sosyal nedenlerden dolayı farklı yerlere dağılmaktadırlar. Amerika kıtası, sonradan keşfedilen ve dünyanın her yerinden insanların gelip yerleştiği bir yerdir. Kolanizasyon sürecinden sonra, Latin Amerika çok kültürlü ve etnik-ırksal olarak insanların kaynaştığı bir yer olmuştur. Fakat, geçmişte unutulmuş, çok iyi bilinmeyen ve bu günde pek hatırlanmayan, oysaki yeni fırsatlar getirebilecek olan bir grup var ki onlarda Müslümanlardır. Diğer taraftan, İslam'ın Latin Amerika'ya nasıl geldiği konusunda tarihi kaynakların eksikliği ve bir fikir birliğinin olmaması bu konunun araştırılması için bir sorun oluşturmaktadır. Bu yazının amacında Amerika kıtasının keşfinden beri, burada olan İslam topluluklarının kısa tarihini, tarihsel süreç içerisinde kronolojik olarak incelemektir. Kölelik, kolonizasyon dönemi ve kolonizasyon sonrası olmak üzere üç dönem belirlenmiştir. Bu dönemler içerisinde İslam'ın bu kıtaya nasıl geldiği ve geliştiği araştırılmıştır. İslam'ın Latin Amerika da nasıl gelişeceği ve bu kıtanın çok kültürlü ve çok farklı kesimlerden oluşan etnik ve ırksal yapısını nasıl zenginleştireceğini gelecek yıllar gösterecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Latin Amerika'da İslam, Latin Amerika'ya Arap Göçü, Latin Amerika'da Türkler, Türklerin Latin Amerika'ya Göçü, Latin Amerika'da Osmanlılar

People are in a constant evolution. This is registered by human history, where it is found how humans respond to cultural diversity, adaptation and different phenomenon. Migration is a phenomenon where individuals or groups displace geographically their place of living generally for economic or social reasons. It is known that the Americas was formed by immigrants from every other continent. Moya (2018) mentions that transcontinental migration has played an exceptionally important role in the Americas. No other continent was formed by immigrants from every other continent with arrivals from Africa and Europe. Also, Hernandez (2018) states that this migration started with the discovery of the American land in 1492 known as the discovery of the New World or beginning of a new era and a great opportunity for the expansion of European territory. On the other hand, in this territory there is another naive migration. Until now the population is adapting or getting to know a new colonizer or immigrant introduced as Islam. The presence of Islam and Muslim minorities has been increasing in the last years, especially in all Latin American countries. There is not clarity how Islam has arrived to the Latin American continent. Nowadays the majority of Muslim population is known to be originated by communities which are conformed by Muslims who had embraced or converted to Islam but there is not certainty.

How this immigrant known as Islam reached this land? Previous researchers have found that Islam in Latin America was developed as well with the discovering of the New World and its colonization, slavery and migration giving the origin to that multiracial and multicultural continent.

The different findings of how Muslim population of Latin America was originated show that the most common stages are: Colonial Islam, slavery and migration stage. Ahsani (1984) found that the population came from three sources: Africa, Europe and Asia. The African migration was before Columbus and continued through the 19th century. European migration from the fall of Grenada and discovery of America. Muslim Arabs, mostly Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians came on their own during late 19th and early 20th century.

This helps to understand the way of Islamic expansion but it does not give specific details. It explains that the manifestations of Islam in Latin America are not uniform and have variations which response to the context or place originated but keep clear that Latin America is a part of a continent of mixed races, cultures and societies.

Taboada (2009) mentions in his article, that the Islamic religion spread with relative ease since its beginnings in the 7th century developing the curiosity and fear of medieval

Europe. Fear and curiosity that instead of stopping, grew and its population later known as Moor, black slaves, Arab immigrants spread even farther.

Therefore, this paper considers how colonization, slavery and migration brought Islam to Latin America and how these movements started and what they developed in this territory.

## **Slavery**

The forced migration process from Africa to the Americas has been the biggest in the history of humanity. Moreover, slave traffic was the most common trade than migration. It was found that:

Forced transportation of 12 million Africans across the Atlantic between 1492 and the middle of the 19th century surpassed arrivals from Europe four to one and represents the first truly massive transoceanic movement in human history. Latin America received 58% of this nefarious inflow with 45% going to Brazil and 13% to Spanish America. The late surge of the slave traffic distinguished Cuba and Brazil from the rest of the Americas. (Moya, 2018)

This movement turned Latin America into one of the important sociocultural complex slave societies of the 19th century. With its religion, language, music, creating an African ethnic identity inside a new context where in some places like Cuba and Brazil was more defined than others.

Therefore, the presence of Afro-descendant communities in the Americas cannot be ignored. In another study by Wagbou (2016) it is mentioned that:

In Latin America and the Caribbean there are countless descendants of Africans who forcibly arrived there: The years of enslavement managed to bring men and women to work in coffee, tobacco, cotton and rice plantations; sugar production factories and mining in different countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 150 million people of African descent in Latin America representing 30% of the total population estimated where Brazil and Colombia represent the territories with the largest black population in Latin America.

This leads to understand that slavery as a historical process where its socio-economic practice, managed and executed by Europeans, was a key to open cultural interactions and relations between Africa and the Americas. For that reason, the cultural

contributions are the base for the construction of multicultural identity with its values, rituals and abilities in Latino America.

Focusing on Islam migration. it was found that there was not sufficient information about Islam or any problem faced by Muslims in Latin America. In his survey Ahsani (1984) mentions some facts about the decline of Islam in Brazil. The decline or not existence could be attributed to different factors such as: class struggle, sentiments of jihad (holy war), social and political causes or that many African Muslims were deported.

### **Colonial Migration**

How was Islam present in Latin America during the colonial migration. Irving (1991), in the past, countries like Spain and Portugal had nine centuries of Islamic rule until King Philip III expelled the last of the Spanish Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, 1492 was a year in Spain of starting and endings. Spaniards had discovered a new world named America and before that was the ending of a great Islamic kingdom in Andalusia. By the conquest of America and especially Latin America, the Spanish gained such a huge land and great opportunities to gain such an enormous wealth and power. They founded gold and silver mines in which they needed to people and slaves to dig them out. At the same time, they have had such an incredibly big agricultural lands they also needed peasant and slaves to work on here. There is no need to mention they shifted all of the wealth and supplies to the main land of Spain. This continued until 1810 great revolutions and uprisings that ended in independence of all of the Latin American countries.

On the other hand, different migrations occurred. Zengin (2020) described that some of Muslims in Andalusia took place in North Africa, others remained in the Iberian Peninsula under the identity of Moors or Mudajeres and some of these Moors crossed the Atlantic. Additionally, a great number of Andalusian Muslims had to cross the Jebel Tarik Strait and reached to the North Africa, some of the seek refuge in Ottoman territories. There was a huge number of Jewish who has been constant persecuted in Spain and Portugal, Catholic countries sought refuge in Morocco Sultanate and other Ottoman territories.

With the conquering of the New World the Catholic church was putting pressure on Spanish rulers to keep out any Islam and have balanced territory in Spain and America for that reason they were making the reminded Muslims convert to Christianity. Also,

the Church as a public institution had unifying laws affecting the beliefs and practices of people.

Time passed, wealth and opportunities generated by silver, gold, metals and economic growth in the New World attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants, creating new routes and traveling to there.

Despite of the regulations and the bans of the Spanish Kingdom, merchants and soldiers from Spaniards took Muslim women along with them to the new world. They preferred to take slaves of Andalusian women who knew more about their culture and customs. Although, their Muslim identity was eventually lost, their handicraft lives on in the metal grills, tiles and lattice work of colonial and later buildings. (Irving, 1991)

In the present days Spaniards and Latin Americans do not have a conscience about the genocide or devastation that the Catholic Inquisition did with the destruction of the Andalusian rule, and the rich heritage which was lost and kept unknown. This happened because the Iberian cultural imprint in Latin America territory became invisible. The foreign culture became so deep and lost in time that it appeared to most observers as local, natural, and common.

Furthermore, in her article Hernandez (2018) explains that being Muslim began to be constructed in an essentialist way, in the same way that Islam ceased to be that belief and practice of submission to Allah and became a religious denomination, which is reinforced by the thought that set up the social sciences. New land, rules, tradition, the difficulties to have an open practice and lack of facilities knocked off the Islamic spirit. In conclusion, there are not clear records or well followed history of how or what happen with Islam during those times, but during the 16th and 17th centuries are known that America was under Iberian rule, that the individual of Arab culture or the Muslim in general was called Moor but also they had begun to be baptized, they were formally Christian and their Arab culture was being lost in isolation. Taboada (2009) states that no Islamic communities seem to have existed in colonial times or during the first decades of independence. In the rest of America there were proven individuals whose faith was kept secret or they were disappearing. Although these individual cases might have existed as a separate cases, there were no organized communities or institutions belong to the Muslims who were already disappeared on Iberian Peninsula by heavy pressure and torture. This was not uncommon considering the degree of tolerance and understanding by Catholic Church.

## Postcolonial Migration

The hispanization of the most indigenous regions of Latin America took place mainly in the postcolonial period and particularly in the 20th century with growing urbanization, internal mobility, expanding national states, public education, and mass media. (Moya, 2018)

Furthermore, it is said that many Middle Easterners who came to Latin America entered as Turcos but they were not Turks or even Muslims. The majority were members of religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states. They are usually names as Turcos, because they were coming from Ottoman or Muslim territories and carrying Ottoman passport or some other documentations.

..."Turco" title is not just a convenient appropriation of an existing label or way of grouping together under a single rubric immigrant from various even conflicting regional, national or ethno religious backgrounds, was initially applied to Arabs, Armenians and Jews with documents issued by the Ottoman authorities. (Klich & Lesser, 1996)

There is not a clear identity or clear Muslim community established. The Middle eastern immigrants were coming and staying in Latino America but to be able to adapt to the new context they were losing their own tradition and forgetting their origins.

In an article by Araneda (2016) he mentions that, the first generation of Arab immigrants and descendants of they had to turn their traditions and cultural expressions towards the family or towards the Arab communities throughout the 20th century.

On the other hand, Taboada (2009) states that the reasons why Muslims vanished as a group could be the attitude of the Church and the society, that it was hard to practice in a non-Islamic environment or the complete cultural isolation. Muslims did not have their own institutions or something similar to guide them or motivate them to keep going. Besides, immigrants with low education and resources tended to lose their distinctive cultural traits more quickly and not be able to pass them to their children.

Moreover, from a social perspective, due to the lack of a multiethnic outlook it has not made it easy to Latin Americans of Arab descent to be part of the population because the retention of aspects of pre-migratory culture is often assumed to signify a lack of social integration with the main population. (Klich & Lesser, 1996)

Even though, finding that keeping up Islam is not a priority, Latinos and Muslims share a cultural affinity in other ways. Sills & Baggett, (2011) found that they both tend to have indirect communication styles, strong multi-generational family bonds, and find their identity in group, collectivistic orientations. For that reason, although Islam could not raise up, a natural affinity was found between Latin Americans and Arab Muslims that helped to a fast cultural adjustment and created a good relationship between them.

To sum up, the flourishing of this religion among Latin America is a phenomenon of during the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, which witnessed a growing Islamization of urban populations, partly caused by migration but later on followed by conversions. (Taboada, 2004)

## Conclusion

Following the stages of: slavery, colonial migration and postcolonial migration it was found, that Islam for Latin America, comes from a historical classification which date back to the presence of Islam in Europe, centuries before the conquest of America, and reappeared during the colonization by European nation states during the 19th and 20th centuries and followed by Middle easterners' migration and conversion.

On the other hand, Islam and its practices tend to be questioned and regulated due to the notion that this tradition is incompatible with the West. Although, later on it was found that some behaviors, values are quite similar between Latin Americans and Arabs making easier transitions and adaptation to a new context and culture.

Nevertheless, the main question which brings migration is why the pre-migratory culture is not persistent with its habits, and its identity. And in this case, how acculturation occurs so fast and is able to remove the strong tradition of Islam. A reason could be that people create priorities and with immigration which provokes not just a coexistence but also a tension between different national histories and identities also creating social changes and harmonies.

Furthermore, it shows that Islam is not uniform and has variations that respond to the main society. Even though it was postcolonial or the last migration which really helped Islam to had a clear origin in Latin America.

In conclusion, further research is required, what was found is still vague, repetitive. New research should focus on the understanding of how Islam has evolved or adapted to the

present and how it will be in the future. How Islam could help Latin America as a multicultural and multiracial land and what are those traditions and values that in the past were not well welcomed or did not stay but nowadays are very interesting and people are looking for them to understand them and follow them. What Islam could offer or facilitate to Latin America and vice versa.

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