

“BROOKLYN AND SUDAN”

FOR LESSON

*Migration
Stories*

NARRATOR **Abdul Rasheed Abdullah**



ABDULLAH My son was going to a school, Al-Madrassa Al-Islamiya, which was one of the first Islamic schools established in New York, and — by Imam, I mean, by Brother Abdul Basir. And one of the teachers there, Brother Zachariah, was a Sudanese brother, and he had got some scholarships for 14 boys to go study in Sudan. And my son was one of the boys that were picked to go study. And at that time, me and his mother didn’t want to just send him off to a country, you know.

RUN TIME **7:49**

ALI How old was he?

ABDULLAH He was 13 at the time. And so I said, “Well, I’ll go and check it out. I’ll go with him.” And when I got to Sudan — [laughter] again, the repetitiveness of personality — said, “Wait a minute, this is, this sound like a, like a, like a, like an ongoing saga” — when I got to Sudan, I knew that this was where I wanted to be, where I wanted to stay. And, as I’ve recently found out, that I have ancestry connections to western Sudan. For some reason, on arriving in Sudan, I felt like I had arrived home.

ALI Tell me — tell me something about what life was like in Sudan versus life in Brooklyn.

ABDULLAH [laughter] Life in Sudan. Again, I think — the experience I would — I would compare in my assessment psychologically of being in Sudan was the — the revival of the spirit I had in the Nation. I mean, I loved the Sudan. I still — I’m, I’m, **insha allah**, I’ll be going back in a couple months. I go back regular. I loved it. And I felt — totally engulfed into Sudanese life. At, at that time there were maybe 25 other American families who were there in Sudan. Where I differed was

INSHA ALLAH
Arabic for
‘God-Willing.’

that they basically stayed within an American enclave and socialized basically with Americans, the families that were there. Not I. From the first day I got there, I got on a bus and went to Khartoum and started walking around. I didn't know how to speak the language; I didn't know where I was going; I didn't — but, but that's how I got to East New York. That's how I got to Yasin Masjid. I didn't know. Because that's always been a perso— part of my personality. Like, how did I get to Yasin Masjid? I just walked in and sat down. How did I assimilate into Sudanese culture? I just dove in. And within six months I was speaking the language, and my, my children and then, and then the whole family came over, and the, the children were in — I put them in the best Islamic school in Khartoum, and they were — they were — you know, English became their second language. Their first language was Arabic, and — and that's where I met my sheikh, and that's where I began to study the science of Sufism and — and going to regular **dhikr**, and also studying **fiqh** and — and, you know, the various sciences of Islam. And my intention was to stay. We had a beautiful house there. You know, and I was going back and forth between Sudan and America doing business, so with the — with the money that I was making in America and sending back to Sudan, my family was doing quite well.

ALI What — besides the language, what was the biggest challenge for you to adjust to life in the Sudan?

ABDULLAH Nothing. Because I — you know, [laughter] like my father used to say, “God protects babies and fools.” [laughter] I think because I'm — I'm — I don't have enough sense, maybe, to have these hang-ups. It's like nothing was challenging. I'm here. After about six months, people — it, it, it was like, “I'm Sudanese.” Not that I forgot or — or de— detached myself from my American identity; it's just that what I've always realized is that if you're going to be a

DHIKR

(pronounced: zikr): a form of devotion often expressed through repeated recitation of Allah's (God's) names, sometimes using prayer beads. This may be done alone or in a group. a form of devotion often expressed through repeated recitation of Allah's (God's) names, sometimes using prayer beads. This may be done alone or in a group.

FIQH

the interpretation of the rules of Islam as determined by Islamic texts and traditions.

part of something, the quicker you assimilate into that which you’re going to be a part of, the more easy the transition and the more enjoyable the transition becomes. So I started to eat their food; I started, you know, to – I took on the dress, and I took on the language, and, and of – of course, being a part of the **tariqa**, it was – it became like a, like, like I said, the second Nation experience in – in my, you know, makeup. Because I felt totally a part of something. That same energizing spirit was re– reenacted in the Sudanese experience. Until the sheikh said, “Son, you got to go home.” [laughter] Because I had planned to stay.

ALI And why, why – yeah.

ABDULLAH To me, that was a **hijra**, a hijra meaning – to me, that was a migration, from the land of the disbelievers to the land of Islam. I was like, “This is it!” You know, I’m, I’m – you know, I’m back in – you know, with the popularity of the movie out now [*Black Panther*, 2018], I’m back in what they calling Wakanda. I done found my, my, my home. You know, this was – this was it! But it wasn’t it.

ALI Why did he tell you you had to go?

ABDULLAH Because he said that I did not come to Sudan to become Sudanese, nor did I come to Sudan to stay in Sudan, but Allah sent me there to learn something, to get something, to go back to America to give to my people. You know. I was like a good Killmonger character. I had to go back, give it to my people.... And when we got back to America, we arrived at Kennedy Airport, and that’s when I knew – I knew what it was like to be an immigrant. Because we arrived [laughter] with practically nothing. And – but I came back with a mission. I had to start teaching. My, my teacher told me to go back and teach.

ALI Is this when you became Sheikh Abdul Rasheed?

TARIQA

a Sufi community or path of spiritual learning.

HIJRA

the Arabic word for migration.

ABDULLAH That was in Sudan, yes.

ALI Okay.

ABDULLAH You know, that was when I had completed my studies, and he had, he had told me that, that, that, “You now have permission” – because everything is by permission – and he told me that, “You now have permission to teach.”

BIO Abdul Rasheed Abdullah was born in 1952 in Brooklyn. In the 1970s, he joined the Nation of Islam and got married, and became involved in Muslim communities in both Queens and Brooklyn. In 1984, Abdullah’s received a scholarship to study in Sudan through Al-Madrassa Al-Islamiya in Sunset Park. The family relocated to Sudan and Abdullah spent his time there studying **Sufism**. After returning to New York, he taught as a licensed Sufi **sheikh** in a **zawiyah** in Brooklyn. He attended Masjid Abdul Muhsi Khalifah and Masjid At-Taqwa, both in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and was head of the Islamic studies department at Masjid Khalifah’s Clara Muhammad School.

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SUFISM

a Muslim spiritual practice that is often described as ‘mystical.’ Sufi communities are organized around traditional forms of knowledge transmission where a teacher, or sheikh, guides students to spiritual knowledge.

SHEIKH

a Muslim leader who has been authorized to teach.

ZAWIYAH

an Islamic religious school or monastery.