



# **An Imagined Geography: Sierra Leonean Muslims in America (Contemporary Ethnography)**

*JoAnn D'Alisera*

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For more than a decade a vicious civil war has torn the fabric of society in the West African country of Sierra Leone, forcing thousands to flee their homes for refugee camps and others to seek peace and asylum abroad. Sierra Leoneans have established new communities around the world, in London, Paris, New York, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. Yet despite the great geographic range of this diaspora and the diverse ethnic backgrounds among Sierra Leoneans settled in the same communities abroad, these Africans have come to understand and express their shared identity through religious rituals, social engagements, and material culture.

In *An Imagined Geography*, anthropologist JoAnn D'Alisera demonstrates persuasively that the long-held anthropological paradigms of separate, bounded, and unique communities, geographically located and neatly localized, must be reconsidered. Studying Sierra Leonean Muslims living in greater Washington, D.C., she shows how these immigrants maintain intense and genuine community ties through weddings, rituals, and travel, across both vast urban spaces and national boundaries. D'Alisera examines two primary issues: Sierra Leoneans' engagement with their homeland, to which they frequently traveled and often sent their children for upbringing until the outbreak of the civil war; and the Sierra Leonean interaction with a diverse, multicultural, increasingly global Muslim community that is undergoing its own search for identity.

Sierra Leoneans in America, D'Alisera observes, express a longing for home and the pain of disconnection in powerful narratives about their country and about their own displacement. At the same time, however, self and communal identity are shaped by a pressing need to affiliate in their adopted country with Sierra Leoneans of all ethnic and religious backgrounds and with fellow Muslims from other parts of the world, a process that is played out against the complex social field of the American urban landscape.

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