

Jacob S. Dorman, [\*The Princess and The Prophet: The Secret History of Magic, Race, and Moorish Muslims in America\*](#) (Boston: Beacon, 2020), pp. 131-33.

Orientalist images were common in Black culture of the 1920s, as they were in American culture more generally. Harlem's Unique Colony Circle of America held an Oriental Costume Ball in 1926, much as Oriental balls were common in New York City's white society. Rudolph Valentino's *Sheik* movies were hits in Harlem's theaters, and Harlem slang transformed young male hipsters into fashionable "sheiks." The sheik's female equivalent was the "sheba;" in honor of the biblical Queen of Sheba, ruler of Ethiopia and lover of King Solomon. Orientalism was a major theme of early films, with seventeen movies with "sheik" in their titles and nine more featuring sheiks in their plots in the 1920s alone, along with such Orientalist fare as *Cleopatra* (1917), *Salome* (1918), *One Arabian Night* (1920), *Kismet* (1920), *The Slim Princess* (1915), and three film versions of the hit play *The Garden of Allah*. Frequently such films played in movie theaters designed to mimic the grandeur of Oriental palaces, such as the stunning Oriental Theater in Chicago, which opened in 1926, or the equally opulent Fox Theater in Atlanta, opened in 1929, which featured Moorish ornamentation and a mosque-like minaret.

Popular songs distributed through sheet music featured their own slew of Islamic Orientalist imagery. Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths Harry B. Smith, Frances Wheeler, and Ted Snyder wrote the famous "Sheik of Araby" in 1921 to accompany the hit Rudolph Valentino film *The Sheik*, and the song achieved such fame that it became an early New Orleans jazz standard, recorded by such stars as Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong. It even made it into the novel *The Great Gatsby*.

But "The Sheik of Araby" was just the tip of the Orientalist sandstorm that blew through European and American popular culture at the beginning of the twentieth century, with scores of songs that made nodding references to Allah and Islam but that fixated on the Islamic Orient as dreamlike, and its women as sexually alluring. A song like "My Lily of the Nile," published by the indefatigable impresario and future congressman Sol Bloom in 1902, illustrates this obsession that arose from the popularity of the Islamic exhibits on the 1893 Midway and in later festivals and fairgrounds: "In the town of Bun-gel-boo, on the river Nile so blue, Where the lotus lilies idly nod and dream ..."

Stand-alone popular songs were not the only form of entertainment fixated on these tropes; musical revues and silent films also featured Orientalist songs; sometimes, as with the musical play *Algeria*, Orientalism provided the central theme. The legendary songwriter Irving Berlin released "Araby" in 1915 with a memorable couplet that commented on the tropes of the craze: "Tonight I'm dreaming of Araby, That's where my dreams seem to carry me / Where everything is Oriental; / And everyone is sentimental." The theme was continued in popular song through the teens and twenties, but the Western obsession with forbidden Islamic sexuality, complete with a kinky longing to surrender imperial power in the Oriental boudoir, was perhaps never expressed so clearly as in 1926's "That Night in Araby": "Oh! what that one night meant, why did I ever leave your tent? Child of the Orient? I'm dreaming of that night of love with you in Araby .... Your harem eyes just made a slave of me."

Images of the Orient appeared from the funny pages to the editorial pages of Black newspapers. In the mid-twenties, a "colored" performer named Joe Downing went by the name Joveddah de Raja and dispensed "words of Oriental comfort and wisdom" on a New York radio station. Many contemporary accounts of Harlem note the large number of mystics plying their trade. "Black art

flourishes in Harlem and elsewhere in New York,” Winthrop D. Lane wrote in 1925. “Egyptian seers uncover hidden knowledge, Indian fortune-tellers reveal the future, sorcerers perform their mysteries. Feats of witchcraft are done daily. A towel for a turban and a smart manner are enough to transform any Harlem colored man into a dispenser of magic to his profit.”

There were storefront shops dedicated to selling candles, incense, powders, books, and other spiritual supplies, and every stationary store in Harlem carried a selection of dream and mystery books, many of which used Orientalist themes, such as the *Oriental Dream Book, with interpretations of all dreams as vouched for by the Orientals, Gypsies, witches, Egyptians, augors, astrologers, magi, fortune-tellers, soothsayers, prophets, seers and wise men of ancient and modern times*, by C. B. Case, published in Chicago in 1916.

Professor Drew, who proclaimed himself to be a Muslim, was only one of many self-proclaimed “Professors of Oriental and African Mystic Science” in Harlem who constructed the Black Orient and the Black self in one motion by writing themselves into this romantic Orientalist imaginary. Advertisements in the era’s *New York Amsterdam News* reveal dozens of Oriental Scientists, including Professor J. Du Jaja, “A Mohammedan Scientist,” of the Asia and Africa Remedy Company, Professor S. Indoo of African Science, “Native of Nigeria,” and Professor Eyo, “A Mohammedan scientist and Oriental Occultism [sic], Native of Africa just arrived.” The famous Harlem magician Herman Rucker also freely used Orientalist imagery in his autobiography, which boasted of fantastical feats in Africa and the Orient before he became a magical sensation in New York.