



VOICE OF
WITNESS

ADAMA BAH

AN EXCERPTED ORAL HISTORY OF POST-9/11 INJUSTICE

Recorded & edited by Alia Malek





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After the attacks of September 11, 2001, many Muslims in the U.S. were questioned and detained on suspicion of terrorism-related crimes. Among them was Adama Bah, a sixteen-year old Muslim girl. On March 24, 2005, she awoke at dawn to discover nearly a dozen armed FBI agents inside her family's apartment in East Harlem. They arrested her and her father, Mamadou Bah, and transported them to separate detention facilities. A government document leaked to the press claimed that Adama was a potential suicide bomber but failed to provide any evidence to support this claim.

Released after six weeks in detention, Adama was forced to live under partial house arrest with an ankle bracelet, a government-enforced curfew, and a court-issued gag order that prohibited her from speaking about her case. In August of 2006, Adama's father was deported back to Guinea, West Africa. Adama, who had traveled to the U.S. with her parents from Guinea as a child, also found herself facing deportation. She would spend the next few years fighting for asylum and struggling to support her family in the U.S. and Guinea.

The morning of March 24, 2005, my family and I were in the house sleeping.

Someone knocked on the door, and my mom went and opened it. These men barged in, waking us up. I always sleep with the blanket over my head. They pull the blanket off my head, I look up, I see a man. He said, "You've got to get out!" I'm like, *What the hell, what's going on?*

I saw about ten or fifteen people in our apartment and right outside our door in the hallway. They were mostly men, but there were two women. Some had FBI jackets, and others were from the police department and the INS. We were all forced out of the bed and told to sit in the living room. They were going through papers, throwing stuff around,

"They were yelling, 'We're going to deport you and your whole family.'"

yelling and talking to each other, then whispering. I heard them yelling at my mother in the background. My mom can't speak much English. They were pulling her into the kitchen, yelling at her, "We're going to deport you and your whole family."

This whole time, I was thinking, *What's going on? What are they talking about?* I knew my dad had an issue with his papers, but I didn't think that my mom did. They kept saying, "We're going to send all of you back to your country."

Then I saw my dad walking in, in handcuffs. They had gone to the mosque to get him. It was the scariest thing you could ever see; I had just never seen my father so powerless. He was always this guy you didn't mess with. If he said do it, you did it. He was just someone you didn't cross paths with.

They took him to the kitchen, whispered something to him.

He sat down, looked at us. He said, "Everything's going to be fine, don't worry."

And then I knew nothing was fine, I knew something was wrong. They told him to

tell us what was going on. He told us that they were going to arrest him and they were going to take him away.

The FBI agents told me to get up and get my sneakers. I was thinking they wanted to see my sneaker collection. I have all types of colors of sneakers. I went and grabbed them. I said, “I have this one, I have this one, I have this one.”

One of the agents said, “Choose one.”

My favorite color is blue, so I picked up a blue pair and said, “This one.”

He said, “Put them on.”

I said, “Okay, but I know they fit me.”

He said, “Put them on!” He was very nasty. Then he said, “All those earrings have to go out.” I have eight piercings on each side, a nose ring, and a tongue ring. I went to the kitchen to take them off, and they followed me in there.

My breath was stinking. I asked, “Can I at least brush my teeth? My breath stinks really bad. Can I use the bathroom?”

They said, “No. We have to go. You’re coming with us.”

I said, “Where am I going to go? Am I going with my dad?” I put on my jacket. They let me put on my head scarf and my abaya, a long dress. Then, one of the women took out handcuffs. I panicked so badly, I was stuttering, “What did I do? Where are we going?”

First time in my life—I’m sixteen years old—in handcuffs. I looked at my dad, and he said, “Just do what they say.”

My mom didn’t know I was going. When we got out the door, she said, “Where she go? Where she go?” They said, “We’re taking her,” and they held my mom back. The man who seemed to be in charge put his hands on my mother to stop her.

They took me and my dad and put us in the same car. I was scared. I said to my dad, “What’s going on? What’s going to happen?” He said, “Don’t say anything, we’re going to get a lawyer. It’s okay, everything is going to be fine.”

There were two Escalades driving with us. I was looking around, paying attention.

“I was nervous.

I was panicking,

I was crying.

*I was trying to
figure out what
was going on.”*

I recognized the Brooklyn Bridge, I recognized a lot of landmarks, but I didn’t recognize the building where my father and I were taken. We got out of the car and we walked past a security booth where the cars drive up to, before taking a ramp beneath the building to the parking lot. Once we were inside the building, they put me in my own cell. It was white, with a bench. No bars. No windows. There was a door that had a tiny glass pane, and I could see who was out there. I just saw a bunch of

computers and tables, and people walking back and forth and talking. I kept seeing them talk to my dad.

I don’t know how long I was in there.

I was nervous. I was panicking, I was crying. I was trying to figure out what was going on. And I was constantly using the bathroom.

The toilet was an open toilet, though. There was a camera on the ceiling in the middle of the room. I was wondering, *Can they see me peeing?* I just wrapped blankets around me as I was peeing.

I'M NOT THIS PERSON

I was taken out of my cell to be interrogated. Nobody told me who they were. It was just me and a man, sitting where all the computers were. Nobody else was around me. There was a guy all the way down at the other end with my dad, but that's about it.

He asked me, "What's your name? What's your age? What's your date of birth? Where were you born?" They knew I was born in Guinea. Then he asked, "What is your citizenship status?"

I said, "American."

He asked me all these questions about my citizenship status. Then after a while, he said, "You know you're not here legally, right? You know why you're here today, right? You weren't born in this country. You know you're not American?"

For a second, I was just so mad at my parents. It was as if one of the biggest secrets in the world had just been revealed to me. I don't know if it was to protect them or if it was to protect me, but that was the biggest secret someone could ever hold.

The guy's attitude didn't change when he realized I didn't know what was going on. He was nasty the whole time. He just sat there explaining the process to me. He asked me if I wanted to see a consular officer.

I asked, "What is a consular officer?"

He said, "You don't know what a consular officer is? Those are people from your country. From Guinea."

I said, "What about them? What do I have to see them for?"

Finally, they called my dad. They gave us a document about how we could see

a consular officer. My dad knows how to read English, but he said to me in Pular, “Pretend you’re translating to me in my language.” Then he said, “Whatever you do, do not say you can go back to your country. They will circumcise you there.”

My dad wasn’t just coming up with a way to stay. There was a real fear of female genital mutilation in Guinea. It happened to my mom. In order to get married in Guinea, a female would have to be circumcised. My dad’s brothers would do it, they would make sure I got circumcised. My parents made a decision when they had girls that they would never do it. That’s the main reason why our parents never took us back to Guinea, not even to visit.

The guy told my dad, “Hey, you’ve got to get up, you’ve got to leave.”

To me they said, “We have to fingerprint you.”

When we were done with the fingerprints, they took a picture of me. I was then sitting on a bench in the main entrance when this young lady walked in. Her name is Tashnuba. I had seen her at the mosque before. I didn’t know her personally. I just recognized her face and knew her name. I said, “Hi,” and I was thinking, *What the hell is she doing here?* So, in my heart, I started panicking, thinking, *Who am I gonna see next?*

Finally I was brought to another room. This room had a table, a chair on one side, and two chairs on the other side. A federal agent walked in. She said, “I need to talk to you about something.” The questions she was asking had nothing to do with immigration. They were terrorism questions. She asked me about people from London, about people from all over the world. I thought, *What’s going on?*

The male interrogator told me that the religious study group Tashnuba was part of had been started by a guy who was wanted by the FBI. I had no idea if that was true or not.

The class at the mosque was all women. So it was women learning about religion, women's empowerment, why we cover, how we do the prayer, when to pray, things like that. It was more for converts and new people who had just come into Islam. There was nothing about jihad or anything like that.

I wasn't part of the group, but Tashnuba was. We were the same age, sixteen. So, they asked me about this group and they told me they'd taken my computer and my diary. My diary was a black-and-white notebook. I had phone numbers, I had notes, I had stories in it, I had everything.

Basically, they asked me about every contact in there, they asked me about every little thing. But, there's nothing in there about jihad, there's nothing in there about anything that's suspicious. There was nothing in there at all. So I wasn't worried.

They said, "We have your computer, we can find whatever you're hiding."

I said, "Go ahead, look in my computer. I have nothing to hide."

They kept making a scene, like there was something big there. They said, "Don't lie to us. If you lie to us, we'll have proof. We'll catch you in your lie."

I knew there was nothing in my computer, but at the end of the day, I started to doubt myself. I thought, *Okay, what's going on now? Is there something there?* Their technique is to make you doubt yourself. But then I thought, *Wait a minute, I'm not this person. What are they talking about?*

The interrogation lasted a long time. This Secret Service guy came in. He asked me how I felt about Bush. I said, "I don't like him." I was being very honest with them. There was nothing to hide.

*"They said,
Don't lie to us.
If you lie to us,
we'll have proof.
We'll catch you
in your lie."*

The Secret Service guy was just too aggressive. He said, “I don’t understand—why do you choose to cover when women choose to wear less and less every day?”

*“We didn’t know
that we were
supposed to
have lawyers.
The FBI never
told us that.”*

I said, “It’s freedom of choice. Some people want to show some stuff, some people want to hide things. Some people want to preserve their bodies, some people don’t want to. They want to show it to the whole world.”

Then they asked me about Tashnuba. They asked me about her name, they asked me about her family, but I told them, “I don’t know her.”

They said, “Tashnuba wrote you on this list.”

I said, “What list?”

They said, “She signed you up to be a suicide bomber.”

I said, “Are you serious? Why would she do that? She doesn’t seem like that type of person.”

They were trying to make me seem like I was wrong about who I knew and who I didn’t know.

They took me out of the interrogation room briefly, because my dad wanted to talk to me. They had him sign papers consenting to them talking to me because I was underage. We didn’t know that we were supposed to have lawyers. The FBI never told us that.

My dad said, “Everything is going to be fine. I want you to be brave. I’ll see you later.”

YOU PUT ME ON A LIST?

Back in the interrogation room, they told me that Tashnuba and I were going to leave. I said, “Where’s my dad, can I say bye to him?”

They said, “He left already.”

I started to cry because I’d had my dad there the whole time. I said, “Where is he going to go? What are you guys going to do?”

They said that he was going to see an immigration judge before the day ended.

I asked, “When am I going to see him? Where am I going?”

They told me to stop with the questions. They brought Tashnuba in and handcuffed us both, hands behind the back. The cuffs were very tight, and I remember they left marks.

We got back in the Escalade. I’m very traumatized when I see Escalades now. This time, I didn’t know where exactly they took me, but it was on Varick Street in Manhattan. When we arrived at our destination, the agent told us to walk in casually because all these people were walking past us on the street. He said, “Act casual and people won’t say anything.”

Tashnuba and I, all by ourselves, got in this elevator. We went up, and we went into this large room that was divided into smaller holding cells. The cells didn’t have bars, but were enclosed with glass. They put us into our own cell. From there, we saw a bunch of men in one of the other cells, all yelling and screaming and talking, all in orange jumpsuits.

Tashnuba and I just looked at each other.

She said to me, “You put me on a list?”

I said, “No! They said you put *me* on a list.” We both realized they had been trying to set us up. So they didn’t have anything on us. They came for her early in the morning, too. They didn’t detain her parents, they just detained her. Tashnuba and I were then trying to figure out what was going on, what they were going to do, if they were going to release us.

That’s when a lady walked in. She said, “What are you guys in for?”

We said, “We don’t know.”

“I hear you guys did something.”

“What did we do?” We were asking *her* for information.

She said, “We’re going to take you to Pennsylvania.”

Tashnuba and I looked at each other, like, *Pennsylvania?* I said, “What are we going to do in Pennsylvania?”

She answered, “They didn’t tell you? There’s a detention center there.”

YOU NO LONGER HAVE RIGHTS

The FBI drove us to Pennsylvania, across state lines, without my parent’s permission. We got to the juvenile detention center late at night. When the FBI agents dropped us off, I wanted to scream, “Please don’t leave us!” I didn’t want to be left there. I didn’t know where I was. There were too many faces for one night for me.

The female guard told me and Tashnuba we had to get strip-searched. We said that was against our religion.

The guard said, “It’s either that or we hold you down.”

I said, “Hold me down and do what? I’m not doing a strip search.” I’m stubborn

like that, but I was in a situation where I had no choice.

So, she said, “Who wants to go first?”

Tashnuba went first. They searched her hair, checked her body parts; they checked everything. She then had to take a shower and change into a uniform they gave her, and then she had to go. When they took her downstairs, the guard said, “Okay, your turn.”

The guard stood there and said, “You’re going to have to take off everything. Take off whatever you feel comfortable with first.”

I said, “I can’t do this. I can’t.” I was in tears. My own mother doesn’t look at me naked. It’s my privacy. I said, “It must be against some law for you to do this to me.”

She said, “No, it’s not. You no longer have rights.”

“Why not? What did I do?”

“You’re just going to have to take your clothes off.”

I was crying, but she just looked at me and said, “Kids here sneak in things and I have to search you.”

I had on my abaya. That was the first thing I took off. Second thing I took off was my head scarf. Third thing I took off was my top. Fourth was my bra. I stopped there for the longest minutes. I put my hands across my chest, just to get that little dignity for myself.

She said, “Come on, I don’t have all day.”

I said, “I can’t do this, I can’t, I can’t.”

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“Drop your pants.”

So, I took off my pants, I took off my underwear, and I kept my legs closed against each other, trying to cover myself. I was just holding myself with the little bit I could.

She said, “You cannot do that. You have to let loose, or else I’ll call another guard and we’ll hold you down and search you. This is your last warning. If you want me to call someone in, I’ll call them in right now, but it’s not gonna be nice. We’re going to hold you down and search you.”

I said, “Okay.” I let go of my arms.

She said, “Lift your breasts.”

I lifted my breasts.

She said, “Open your legs more.”

I opened my legs.

She said, “Put your hands in there, to see there’s nothing.”

I said, “There’s nothing there!”

She said, “Just do it.”

I did it.

She said, “Turn around, put your hands up.”

I did that.

Then she said, “Alright, now put your fingers to your hair, pull at your ears. Show me your ears, open your mouth.”

I showed my mouth.

“Show me your nose.”

I put my finger up my nose, put it up so she could see.

Then she gave me a blue uniform: sweat pants, socks, underwear, a bra, a hair tie,

and a little towel and washcloth. She told me to take a shower in five minutes, and then she left.

I knew I only had five minutes, but I just sat at the corner of the shower and held myself and cried. I was thinking, *I cannot believe what I just went through*. I was just crying and crying and crying, I don't know how long, but then I just told myself that I had to get up. I washed myself really quickly. I've never felt like I needed God more than I did on this day. So, I did Ghusul which is like a special shower for prayer. I prayed, "God, you've got to hear me for this one. I've never asked for anything that I desperately needed but this one."

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this day.*

I dried myself and put my clothes on. There was a little mirror there. I looked into it. My eyes were red from crying.

The guard returned and told me I have to take off my head scarf. I said, "It's part of my religion." And I was having a bad hair day, I was not ready to show my hair. She let me keep the scarf, but later the supervisor took it from me once she saw me.

I was then taken to my cell. As we walked, the guard said, "You must keep your hands at your sides at all times." You had to look straight, you couldn't look anywhere else. There were cameras everywhere, but I couldn't help it, I was looking around.

I still didn't know why I was there. I didn't know if it was for immigration or if it was for the stuff they were interrogating me about. When I got to the cell, all the lights were out. I could see Tashnuba in the corner, praying. There was one blanket, and it was freezing cold in there.

We stayed up the whole night talking about everything. I found out her mom

had just had a baby; my mom had just had a baby too. Tashnuba was the oldest, I was the oldest. I asked her age, she asked my age. I asked what school she went to, what she was studying, what she wanted to do with her life.

We were laughing, like, “Pinch me. This is a prank.”

She said, “Maybe it will all be straightened out by tomorrow.”

I don’t know how we fell asleep, but I remember at one point we were both crying.

THERE GOES A TERRORIST

Nobody told me what was going on. I wasn’t brought before a judge until my fourth week there, and it was via video conference.

An article came out in the *New York Times* about why Teshuba and I were there, that we were suspected of being suicide bombers. I never saw the article while in prison. I saw it when I came out. After the guards read what happened, things changed. They would whisper, “There goes a terrorist,” or “There go those girls.”

After the article came out we got extra strip searches, about three times a day, and the searches got stricter. They would tell us to spread our butt cheeks, and they made nasty, racist comments. I remember the guards laughing and saying, “Look at those assholes. Look at them. These are the ones that want to take our country down.” Things like that.

If I talked back, they would tackle me down and I would be put into solitary. All I wanted to do was get out. I knew that I was going to have to take shit from everyone, because I did not want to be in solitary confinement.

The full text of Adama Bab's narrative can be found in the forthcoming book Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice.

About VOICE OF WITNESS

Voice of Witness is a nonprofit book series that empowers those most closely affected by contemporary social injustice. Using oral history as a foundation, the series depicts human rights crises around the world through the stories of the men and women who experience them.

Adama Bah's narrative is one of the oral histories that will appear in the forthcoming book *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*. Over the course of eight months, editor Alia Malek led a team of interviewers in the U.S. to record the stories of men and women from Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian (AMEMSA) communities whose lives have been impacted by post-9/11 policy. Including second and third interviews, almost sixty interviews were recorded. After the interviews were transcribed, Malek edited the transcripts into first-person narratives, with the assistance of the interviewees. All narratives were exhaustively fact-checked with primary and secondary sources. When necessary, names and locations were changed to protect narrators.

For more information, visit voiceofwitness.org

ABOUT THE EDITOR

ALIA MALEK is an author (*A Country Called Amreeka*, Free Press, 2009) and a civil rights lawyer. Born in Baltimore to Syrian immigrant parents, she began her legal career as a trial attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. After 9/11, in addition to her regular duties at the Department of Justice, which focused on Americans' civil rights in educational contexts, Alia's responsibilities came to also include reaching out to and serving the needs of vulnerable groups targeted by backlash discrimination and hate crimes.

After working in the legal field in the U.S., Lebanon, and the West Bank, Malek, who has degrees from Johns Hopkins and Georgetown Universities, earned her master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. Her reportage has appeared in *Salon*, *The Columbia Journalism Review*, and the *New York Times*.

ADAMA BAH'S STORY IS EXCERPTED FROM

PATRIOT ACTS

NARRATIVES OF POST-9/11 INJUSTICE

A collection of oral histories published by Voice of Witness and McSweeney's.

P*atriot Acts* tells the powerful stories of men and women who have been needlessly swept up in the War on Terror. In their own words, narrators recount personal experiences of the post-9/11 backlash—from rendition and torture, to workplace discrimination and bullying—that have deeply altered their lives and communities.

VOICE OF WITNESS is a nonprofit book series that empowers those most closely affected by contemporary social injustice. Using oral history as a foundation, the series depicts human rights crises around the world through the stories of the men and women who experience them. Voice of Witness was founded by author Dave Eggers and physician/human rights scholar Lola Vollen, and is the nonprofit division of McSweeney's Books.



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WITNESS**

This story is one of eighteen narratives in the forthcoming
Voice of Witness book *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*.

For more information, visit voiceofwitness.org