

# CULTURAL DAKWAH AND MUSLIM MOVEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

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**Abstract:** There have been Muslims in what is now the United States since tens of thousands were brought as slaves in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Very few maintained their Muslim identities because the harsh conditions of slavery. Revitalization movements relying on Muslim symbolism emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were primarily concerned with the struggle against racism and oppression. The Moorish Science Temple of American and the Nation of Islam are the two most important of these movement. The *haj* was a transformative experience for Nation of Islam leaders Malcom X and Muhammad Ali. Realization that Islam is an inclusive faith that does not condone racism led both of them towards mainstream Sunni Islam and for Muhammad Ali to Sufi religious pluralism.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** *Nation of Islam, Moorish Science Temple, Revitalization Movement, Malcom X, Muhammad Ali*

**Abstract:** Sejarah Islam di Amerika sudah berakar sejak abad ke 18 dan awal 19, ketika belasan ribu budak dari Afrika dibawa ke wilayah yang sekarang bernama Amerika Serikat. Sangat sedikit di antara mereka yang mempertahankan identitasnya sebagai Muslim mengingat kondisi perbudakan yang sangat kejam dan tidak memungkinkan. Di awal abad 20, muncul-lah gerakan revitalisasi Islam. Utamanya, mereka berkonsentrasi pada gerakan perlawanan terhadap rasisme dan penindasan. The Moorish Science Temple of American dan the Nation of Islam adalah dua kelompok terpenting gerakan perlawanan tersebut. Perjalanan ibadah haji memberikan pengalaman transformatif bagi pimpinan kedua kelompok gerakan tersebut, yaitu Malcom X dan Muhammad Ali. Pemahaman Islam yang inklusif yang tidak sejalan dengan rasisme mendekatkan mereka dengan ajaran-ajaran mainstream Islam sunni, dan (terutama) Muhamad Ali yang condong ke pluralisme ajaran kaum Sufi.

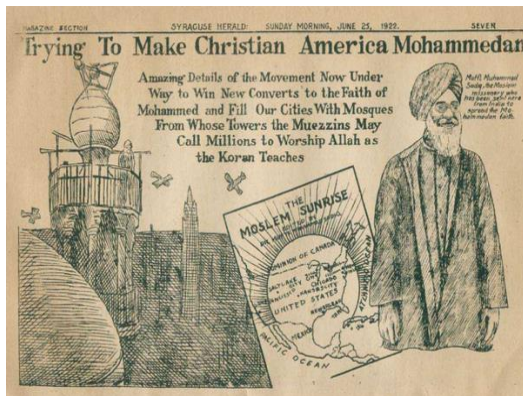
**Kata Kunci:** *Nation of islam, Moorish Science Temple, Gerakan revitalisasi, Malcom X, Muhammad Ali*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on library research on personal observations in Louisiana and Mississippi in the American South.

## Cultural Dakwah

The term *dakwah* generally refers to efforts to bring people to Islam, when used in reference to non-Muslims or to deepen the faith of those who are already Muslims and convince them to be more observant. In Indonesia, the term “cultural *dakwah*” often refers to efforts to conduct *dakwah* within narrative and symbolic frames defined in terms of local cultures. The *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints) who were instrumental in establishing Islam as the religion of Java are often mentioned as practitioners of cultural *dakwah*. *Wayang* (shadow plays) are among the techniques that they used.<sup>2</sup> The logic of cultural *dakwah* is that is that people are more likely to accept Islam when it is presented in terms of familiar narratives and symbols.



News Paper Account of Dakwah in the United States 1922

Indonesia’s largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah endorse this

<sup>2</sup> Van Dijk, Kees (1998) “Dakwah and Indigenous Culture: The Dissemination of Islam.” *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*; Woodward, Mark (2018) “Islam Nusantara: A Symbolic and Semantic Analyses,” *Heritage of Islam Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage*.

approach to *dakwah* as opposed to the style practiced by some Salafi groups that equates conversion to Islam, or strengthening the faith, with the adoption of Arab cultural styles and practices.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I use the term in a somewhat different way. In societies where Islam is virtually unknown or practiced by minuscule minorities cultural *dakwah* operates at societal as well as personal levels. It frames Islam -- as a socio-religious category -- in ways that makes it less foreign. It defines Muslim identities -- not as something foreign and potentially threatening, but as a natural sub-variety of societal identity. This is a sociological process that establishes conditions in which more conventional forms of *dakwah* are possible.

I will be concerned with the history of cultural *dakwah* in the United States, especially among African Americans. I argue that the establishment of Muslim identities began well in advance of the spread of mainstream Islamic teachings among people who consider themselves to be Muslims and were accepted as such by the larger American public. African American Muslim communities began

<sup>3</sup> Daniels, Timothy (2009). *Islamic spectrum in Java*. Burlington: Ashgate, Suprato (2009) “Kultutal Dakwah Muhammadiyah: Antara Pembaruan dan Pembaruan, *el-Harakah*”; Woodward, Mark (2017) “Resisting Salafism and the Arabization of Indonesian Islam: A Contemporary Indonesian Didactic Tale by Komaruddin Hidayat,” *Contemporary Islam*.

as revitalization movements dedicated to the struggle against racism and poverty. They viewed the construction of a distinctive African American religious identity as an essential component of this process. Only later did members of the community adopt more mainstream Sunni beliefs and practices, often as the result of participation in the Haj. This, in turn, has contributed to the development of a still emerging distinctively “American” Muslim identity that transcends cultural and ethnic distinctions and those between nativized (meaning groups who came to North American in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) and more recent immigrants.

I begin with a brief overview of the history of Islam in the United State and an account of the social characteristics of the American Muslim community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From there I move to accounts of two early African American Muslim movements: The Moorish Science Temple of America and the Nation of Islam and five of the most prominent African American Muslim leaders: Prophet Noble Drew Ali (1886-1929) of the Moorish Science Temple, Wallace Fard Muhammad (1877-1934) and Elijah Mohamed (1897-1975) of the Nation of Islam who were concerned with constructing an African American Muslim alternative to White Christian identity and Malcolm X (1925-1965) and Muhammad Ali (1942-2016) who moved the community in the direction of mainstream Sunni Islam, and Sufism in the case of Muhammad Ali.

## Islam in the United States - A Brief History

There have been Muslims in what is now the United States since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A handful came from North Africa voluntarily, but most were brought as slaves from West Africa. As many as 30% of the six to seven million Africans brought to American as slaves before this most pernicious form of human trafficking was abolished in 1808 may have been Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

African-American Muslims are known to have fought on both sides of the American Revolution against the British (1775-1781) and in the War of 1812, again against the British.<sup>5</sup> The Founding Fathers of the United States had a favorable impression of Islam. Perhaps because George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and others were Enlightenment Deists, who believed in God, but were not Christians, they were inclined towards pluralism and tolerance.<sup>6</sup> President Jefferson (1743-1809) hosted the first *Iftar* dinner in the White House in 1805. This tradition was not renewed until President Clinton (1946-) hosted one in 1996. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) planned an inter-faith chapel

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<sup>4</sup> Ghanea Bassiri, Kambiz (2010) *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Curtis, Edward (2010) *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History*, New York: Facts on File.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, William (2003). *The First Liberty: America's Foundation in Religious Freedom*, Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press.

and wrote that: "... even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mohammedanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service."<sup>7</sup>

Very few records survive about the lives, religious beliefs and practices of the earliest American Muslims. It is, however, clear that some accomplished Muslim scholars were brought to the United States as slaves. Bilali Muhammad (died 1857) was the *imam* of a community of at least 80 Muslim slaves on a plantation in Georgia.<sup>8</sup> He was fluent in Arabic and familiar with Hadith, Shari'ah, and Tafsir. He composed an Arabic language Malaki legal text based on the *Risala of Ibn Abu Zayd* that was in common use in Islamic schools in West Africa at the time.<sup>9</sup> Bilal's synopsis was written entirely from memory. It is preserved in the library of the University of Georgia.<sup>10</sup>

The social conditions of slavery were such that these early Muslim communities did not survive. The majority of African-American converted to Protestant Christianity

from either Islam or Indigenous African Religions. Christianity rapidly sank deep roots in African American culture. The African-American Muslim communities that emerged beginning in the 1920s are New Religious Movements, not reversion to a dimly remembered Islam.



**Fiqh Text Written by Bilali Muhammad in the Early Nineteenth Century**

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a trickle of Muslim immigration from the Ottoman Empire, especially from Lebanon. The first mosque in the United States was constructed by Lebanese immigrants in Ross North Dakota, a tiny town (population 2010, 97) located in a remote corner of the Great Plains in 1929.<sup>11</sup> The mosque fell into disrepair and was reconstructed in the 1970s.

<sup>7</sup> Waldman, Steven (2006) "Farmers and the Faithful," *Washington Monthly*.

<sup>8</sup> Diouf, Sylviane (1998). *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York: State University of New York Press.

<sup>9</sup> Abdullah ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (922-996) was one of the leading scholars of the time. For a translation of this text see: Kennedy, Joseph (1992). *The Risala: Treatise on Maliki Law of 'Abdallah Ibn-Abi-Zayd Al-Qayrawani (922-996): An Annotated Translation*. London: Islamic Education Trust.

<sup>10</sup> Abdullah al-Ahari, Muhammad. (2010) *Bilali Muhammad Muslim Jurisprudist in Antebellum Georgia*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

<sup>11</sup> Koszegi, Michael and Melton, Gordon (1992). *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook*. New York: Garland Publishing.





Ross North Dakota Mosque -- Circa 1930



Ross North Dakota Mosque -- Contemporary Image

Substantial immigration from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia began after the Second World War when what was essentially a “white only” immigration policy ended. Today there are approximately 3.3 million Muslims in the United States or about one percent of the population. Islam is growing at a faster pace than other religions due to immigration, conversion and higher than average birth rates. The American Muslim community is ethnically and religiously diverse. Approximately 34% of American Muslims come from South Asian (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan) backgrounds, 26% are Arab or

Iranian. Approximately 15% are from African, Eastern European or Southeast Asian backgrounds. Approximately 25% are African-Americans.<sup>12</sup>

### **African American Islam -- From New Religious Movements to Mainstream Sunni Islam**

The growth of African American Muslim communities can only be understood in the context of the political and economic conditions in which they originated. The abolition of slavery in 1865 changed, but only marginally improved, conditions of life for African Americans. Political compromises designed to aid the reincorporation of southern states into the union at the end of the Civil War (1861-1865) led to the reformulation rather than elimination of the conditions of servitude African Americans endured. They were emancipated, but denied basic rights.<sup>13</sup> Most continued to live in conditions of poverty and oppression in the rural South. The abolition of slavery did not lead to land reform, economic or political empowerment. Slavery was replaced by a system of debt bondage known as “share

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<sup>12</sup> These figures are approximate and are based on surveys by the Pew Research Center and the US Department of State. The United States census bureau does not collect information about religion. It collects on rudimentary data about ethnicity. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/>

<sup>13</sup> Gates, Louis (2019) *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*, New York: Penguin

cropping” under which former slaves and their descendants worked the fields of their former masters for a portion of the crop, usually 30% to 50%. Share croppers were required to purchase necessities of life from stores owned by land owners meaning that most were perpetually in debt. The economic conditions African American sharecroppers endured were similar to those of Javanese peasants under the Dutch Cultivation System.<sup>14</sup>

There was strict racial segregation similar to that in South Africa under the Apartheid system. African American could not vote, attended segregated and markedly inferior schools. They also endured innumerable forms of symbolic domination. Restaurants, hotels, hospitals and even public toilets were strictly segregated. What passed for “justice” for African Americans accused of crimes was brutal. Protesting or attempting to cross the “color line” led to beating, torture and murdered by hooded white vigilantes known as the Ku Klux Klan. This system, known as “Jim Crow,” endured until the passage of US federal civil

and voting rights acts in the mid 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

Increasing demands for labor in the industrial north during the First World War sparked the “Great Migration” to northern cities including New York, Chicago and Detroit.<sup>16</sup> Between 1910 and 1930 more than 1.5 million African-Americans moved north. Conditions for in the industrial north were not good. African Americans continued to suffer from discrimination and lived in segregated communities where education and employment opportunities were limited, but conditions were certainly better than in the Jim Crow South. Migrants also confronted problems of social dislocation and of adapting to urban social environments.<sup>17</sup> Conditions were, however, sufficiently better to allow for the unfettered growth of a wide variety of social movements, institutions and organizations that aspired to economically, politically and religiously empower African Americans.

Many of these, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP founded 1909) were secular

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<sup>14</sup> Wayne, Michael (1983) *The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860-1880*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; Davis, Allison and Gardner, Burleigh (2009) *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. Cultivation System and its consequences for Javanese peasants see: Fasseur, Cornelius (1994). *The Politics of Colonial Exploitation: Java, The Dutch, and the Cultivation System*. Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.

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<sup>15</sup> Blackmon, Douglas (2008). *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Doubleday

<sup>16</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel (2010). *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House.

<sup>17</sup> Kiser, Clyde (1932). *Sea Island to City: A Study of St. Helena Islanders in Harlem and Other Urban Centers*, New York: Columbia University Press.

reform movements. Others were social movements deeply rooted in the Black Church. Still others had separatist, African American nationalist aspirations calling for repatriation to West Africa. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was among the most influential African American nationalists. He was a Jamaican born public intellectual, politician, entrepreneur and advocate of Pan-Africanism. He was an enormously popular and controversial figure who advocated strengthening ties between Africans and African-Americans and severing ties with white Americans and Europeans. He founded the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 and subsequently declared himself to be president of the Empire of Africa.<sup>18</sup> Still others turned to Islam in efforts to construct new African American personal and collective identities.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the movements have the characteristic of what Anthony Wallace terms revitalization movements. Wallace describes these movements as: "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a group to create a new culture." Revitalization movements seek to abolish existing social structures, power configurations and the symbolic systems legitimizing them.

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<sup>18</sup> Ewing, Adam (2014). *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Eyerman, Ron (2001) *Cultural Trauma, Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sullivan, Patrick (2010) *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, New York: The New Press.

They aim to re-establish a pristine and more just social order or to build an entirely new one.<sup>20</sup> Revitalization movements are widely distributed in time, geographic, cultural and religious space. Examples include the American Indian Ghost Dance Movement that sought to vanquish white settlers, medieval German peasant rebellions based on Anabaptist Christianity that sought to reconfigure society along egalitarian lines, Javanese *ratu adil* movements predicting the coming of a just king and contemporary Islamist movements seeking to restore the Caliphate.<sup>21</sup> They occur at times of economic, cultural and or religious crisis and are common responses to colonialism.

### **African-American Muslim Movements**

Two factors contributed the development of African-American Muslim movements in the early twentieth century. One was the emphasis the Black Church placed on theodicy or the theological explanation of oppression rather than struggling against it. Another was the arrival of the Ahmadiyah *dai* Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq in 1921.

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<sup>20</sup> Wallace, Anthony (1956). "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*.

<sup>21</sup> La Barre, Weston (1990). *Ghost Dance: The Origins of Religion*, Denver: Waveland Press; Wunderli, Robert (1992). *Peasant Fires. The Drummer of Niklashausen*, Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press; van der Kroef, Justus (1959) "Javanese Messianic Expectations: Their Origin and Cultural Context," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.

The Black Church confronted the problem of why a just God would allow the types of suffering the African-American community faced.<sup>22</sup> Why would a benevolent God allow people he loves to suffer so much? A related question is: "Is God actually a racist?" A detailed exposition of the range of answers the Black Church had to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. Most affirm basic Christian teachings. One is encapsulated in the expression: "The heavier the cross, the greater the crown." This is an otherworldly theodicy promising rewards in heaven for those who suffer, but remain firm in their faith, in this world. There are also social theodicies building on the concept of the "chosen people." One example is that at the time of Moses the Jews were God's people, but that this mandate passed to Christians, and finally to African-American Christians because of the evil of slavery. Nathaniel Paul (1793-1839) put it this way: "slavery has been your curse, but it shall become your rejoicing."<sup>23</sup> There are many other examples. The idea of Africa also exerted a strong pull on the imaginations of African-American religious thinkers and secular Black Nationalists. Islam entered into African-American discourse because it was understood as an African religion.

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<sup>22</sup> Warnock, Raphael (2014). *The Divided Mind of the Black Church. Theology, Piety and Public Witness* New York: New York University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Steward, Austin (1856/1969). *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Free Man: Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years*. New York: Negro Universities Press.

## Ahmadiyah Dakwah in the United States

Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq (1872-1957) was among the first *dai* to come to the United States. He was from British India and was a close companion of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) the founder of the Ahmadiyah movement.

He traveled to the United Kingdom in 1917 where he continued his preaching and writing activities. After two and a half years he was sent to the United States to establish a new Ahmadiyah mission. Immigration authorities detained him when he arrived in New York because they feared that he might preach polygamy. By the time he was released two months later he had converted twenty of his fellow prisoners to Islam. He traveled extensively during this stay in the United States and made more than a thousand converts.



**Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq**  
Sadiq and subsequent Ahmadiyah *dai* concentrated their efforts on the African-American community because they judged, correctly, that their message of racial equality would be appealing. He established his headquarters in the predominantly African-American south side of Chicago and by the time



he left the United States in 1925 he had made more than a thousand converts.<sup>24</sup>

Sadiq's message of racial equality and the universalist and anti-colonialist themes in Ahmadiyah discourse attracted the attention of Garvey's UNIA. In 1923 Sadiq gave a series of five lectures at UNIA meetings that resulted in at least forty conversions. He clearly understood the importance of cultural *dakwah*, selecting themes that resonated with the concerns of African-Americans and downplaying those centering on intra-Islamic debates.

### **African-American Muslim Revitalization Movements**

Ahmadiyah was soon eclipsed in both size and visibility by movements that focused more on constructing new religious identities than on doctrinal matters. Two of the most important of these are the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Nation of Islam. Analytically they can be understood as "Local Islams," and simultaneously as "New Religious Movements."<sup>25</sup>

### **The Moorish Science Temple of America**

The origins of The Moorish Science Temple of American (MTSA) are obscure.<sup>26</sup> The organization's

official position is that it was founded in Newark New Jersey in 1913, prior Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq's arrival in the United States. It was not officially incorporated until 1925 in Chicago, which was also the location of the headquarters of the Ahmadiyah Movement. Academic studies point to more complex origins.<sup>27</sup>

MTSA teachings and symbolism are eclectic, combining elements of Islamic, Masonic and African-American nationalist traditions. Masonic movements are not in any sense Islamic, but make extensive use of Muslim and Middle Eastern symbols and costumes. They are highly secretive, so little is known publically about their ritual practices. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were extremely popular in the United States, including among African Americans. The Shriners had the greatest influence on MTSA.

The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (Shriners) is a Masonic organization established in New York in 1870. It relies heavily on Arab, Ottoman and Islamic symbolism. Meeting halls were originally called mosques or temples, the first to be established was named the "Mecca Temple." Shriners wear Ottoman style Fezzes at public events. African American Masons formed a similar group, the Ancient Egyptian

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<sup>24</sup> Dhost Muhammad Shahid (2016). "Mufti Muhammad Sadiq: Founder of Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in the United States of America," *The Muslim Sunrise*.

<sup>25</sup> Woodward, Mark (2011). *Java, Indonesia and Islam*, New York: Springer.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest, Allen (2000). "Identity and Destiny: The Formative Views of the Moorish

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Science Temple and the Nation of Islam," in: Haddad, Yvonne and Esposito, John (eds.) (2000). *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>27</sup> Bowen, Patrick (2011). "Abdul Hamid Suleiman and the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Religion*.

Arabic Order in 1893. The Shriners and other Masonic organizations were extremely influential in the African American community at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup>

Bowen reports that in the 1920's rudimentary knowledge of Islam and Shriner rites and symbols were fused in the formation of African American social/religious movements that identified themselves as Muslim. One example of this fusion was Abdul Hamid Suleiman who made wildly inaccurate claims about relationships between Islam and Free Masonry. He claimed that he was: "a Mohammedan by birth, Master of the Koran, having pilgrimaged to Mecca three times and thus become an Eminent High Priest and head of all Masonic degrees in Mecca," preached that the leaders of Muslim countries were Shriners, that the *Qur'an* was written in 410 BCE and that he had worn a New York Shriners Fez for fifteen years while serving as a High Priest in Mecca.<sup>29</sup> This is an example of the myth building process Claude Levi Strauss termed *bricolage* through which mythemes of diverse origin are fused together as a coherent whole.<sup>30</sup>

Noble Drew Ali (Timothy Drew 1886-1929), the recognized founder of MTSA, may have been influenced by

both Abdul Hamid Suleiman and Dr. Sadiq. Photographs of early MTSA gatherings include men wearing Shriner style Fezzes. Sadiq is known to have considered African-American Masonic groups to be an important mission field and to have converted an unknown number of Black Masons. Noble Drew Ali taught that African-Americans were descendants of Moroccan Muslims and referred to his followers as "Moors." He forged a specific identity for them -- Moorish by nationality and Muslim by religion and issued Moorish Nationality Cards. His theology drew on a variety of esoteric sources and focused on self-empowerment through mystical knowledge. They are included in a Holy Book known as the *Circle Seven Koran*. Portions of this book are drawn from the *Qur'an*, Rosicrucian and esoteric Christian sources. Drew Ali wrote others himself.<sup>31</sup>

He preached racial pride and collective self-improvement, offered hope and a new identity to people who were still suffering from the degradation of slavery. He rejected labels such as black, colored and negro and demanded that his followers reclaim their ancestral Moorish identity. He was not a racist and urged people of all races to love one another. Nor was he a black separatist like Garvey. He worked closely with white Chicago politicians.

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<sup>28</sup> Walker, Corey (2008). *A Noble Fight: African American Freemasonry and the Struggle for Democracy in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>29</sup> Bowen, Patrick (2011) "Abdul Hamid Suleiman and the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Religion*.

<sup>30</sup> Levi Strauss, Claude (1966). *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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<sup>31</sup> Nance, Susan. (2002) "Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple: Southern Blacks and American Alternative Spirituality in 1920s Chicago" *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*.

American flags are often displayed at MSTA events.



**Moorish Science Temple of America, National Convention 1928  
Noble Drew Ali, Front Row Center, Dressed in White**

MSTA is an example of cultural *dakwah* in which Islam and Muslim symbols are tools for advancing social and cultural agendas. Nonetheless, members strongly identify as Muslims. Membership peaked at approximately 30,000 in the 1930s and has steadily declined since that time. This can be attributed to factionalism and to the rise of the more militant Nation of Islam.

### **The Nation of Islam**

The Nation of Islam was founded by Wallace Fard Muhammad (1877-1934) when his attempt to take control of MSTA after Ali's death failed. Very little is known about him other than that he claimed to have been born in Mecca and to be a reincarnation of Noble Drew Ali.<sup>32</sup> He taught that African Americans the original humans and descendants of the lost tribe of Shabazz, who had been stolen from their home in either Africa according to one version of the

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<sup>32</sup> Polk, Andrew (2020) "The Best Knower: Mythmaking, Fard Muhammad, and the Lost-Found Nation of Islam," *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*.

story or from Mecca according to another. He preached that white people are devils and that if African Americans return to Islam, Allah will overthrow the oppressive white system, and return them to their original home.<sup>33</sup>



**Wallace Fard Muhammad**

Fard Muhammad vanished without a trace in 1934. His pupil and designated successor was Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975). He was the son of sharecroppers and had worked as one himself. His worldview was profoundly shaped by the violence he witnessed as a young man. He saw three black men lynched by whites before he was twenty years old. He is quoted as saying: "I seen enough of the white man's brutality to last me 26,000 years."<sup>34</sup> His enthusiasm for Fard Muhammad's message of empowerment and religious independence is not difficult to understand.

Elijah Muhammad received instructions and teachings from Fard Muhammad that were to become the

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<sup>33</sup> Lee, Martha (1996) *The Nation of Islam: An American Millenarian Movement*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

<sup>34</sup> Clegg, Claude (1998). *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

core of the Nation of Islam's ideology and theology.<sup>35</sup> He transformed the Nation of Islam from a local to a national organization. Under his leadership, and despite his exclusivist, racist ideology, it came to have a significant voice in American politics. He taught that Fard Muhammad was an incarnation of Allah, the Messiah and the Madhi and does not seem to have been troubled by the seeming contradiction. Lewis Farrakhan, the current leader of the Nation of Islam explained that Elijah Muhammad told him that:

The Messiah did not live 2,000 years ago. Jesus of 2,000 years ago was a prophet. The Messiah is more than a prophet. He is a man in whom is the Indwelling Spirit, Wisdom, Knowledge and Power of Allah (God), Himself.<sup>36</sup>

This is classic *bricolage*. He also believed himself to be the messenger of God. He required his followers to adhere to a modified version of the five pillars of Islam: The confession of faith; prayer; fasting; alms giving and pilgrimage to Mecca. Originally prayer did not conform with mainstream Muslim practice and fasting could be conducted in December to help wean converts from traditional Christmas celebrations. Over time Nation of Islam ritual practice has come to resemble that of mainstream Muslims more closely. It also forbids gambling, eating pork, drinking alcohol and smoking. In his

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<sup>35</sup> Berg, Herbert (2009). *Elijah Muhammad and Islam*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>36</sup> Farrakhan, Lewis (2009). "The Greatness of Master Fard Muhammad," *The Final Call*, July 13, 2009.

preaching and writings Elijah Muhammad referenced the Bible as much as the *Qur'an*. This is another example of cultural *dakwah* because the Bible is the scripture that African Americans are most familiar with. He also referenced traditional African American Christian musical traditions. Like many modernist Muslim intellectuals, he also spoke of the congruity of Islamic teachings and modern science.<sup>37</sup>



Elijah Muhammad

Elijah Muhammad was an African American Nationalist. He rejected Marcus Garvey's call for reverse migration to Africa, the prospect for which became increasingly unrealistic. He called for the establishment of an independent African American nation in North America unless the white establishment was willing to ensure justice and equality. He was also an entrepreneur and built a business empire including farms, retail stores, restaurants, banks, trucking and air transport companies to serve the

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<sup>37</sup> Muhammad, Elijah (1965) *Message to the Blackman in America*, Chicago: Secretarius MEMPS Publications.

Nation of Islam and the larger African American community.

His emphasis on African American independence and self-reliance allowed him to engage in dialog with white supremacist groups.<sup>38</sup> They differed on nearly everything except the belief that black people and white people should not live together. While this contravenes the most basic Islamic teachings about race, the accommodation appeared to make sense given the intensity of racial tension in the United States at the time.

Most Muslims would consider Elijah Muhammad's teachings to be highly unorthodox. He expanded on the religious claims of his predecessors while retaining and intensifying their emphasis on the struggle to liberate African Americans. Islam was an identity to aid in this struggle. Increasingly the eclectic teachings of Elijah Muhammad came to be regarded as scripture. Because he and his followers believe Wallace Fard Muhammad to be Allah, his speech obtained the same ontological status as the *Qur'an*. The Nation of Islam now has between twenty and fifty thousand members.

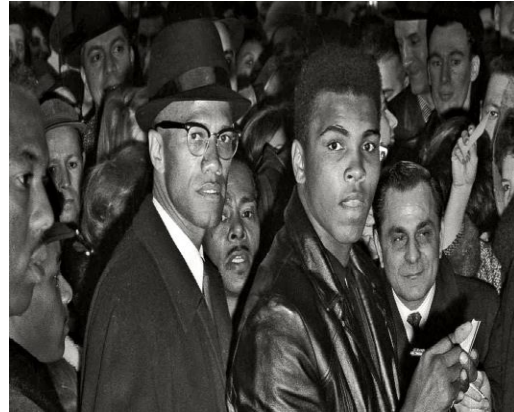
### **Moving Towards the Mainstream - Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali**

In the 1960s the American public was remarkably uninformed about Islam. Much of what people

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<sup>38</sup> Lee, Martin. (2002). "Strange Bedfellows: Some American Black Muslims Make Common Cause with Domestic Neo-Nazis and Foreign Muslim Extremists." *Intelligence Report*.

thought they knew, came from the 1962 film "Lawrence of Arabia" and the 1960 Zionist epic "Exodus." The first romanticized Saudi Arabian tribal culture, and had little to say about Islam. The second demonized Arabs and also had little to say about Islam.



**Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali**

In the African American community, it was nearly taken for granted that Islam was what the Nation of Islam said it was. As knowledge of Islam and the Middle East increased there were moves towards mainstream Sunni Islam and new varieties of cultural and conventional *dakwah*. Conventional *dakwah* was largely internal, focusing on reshaping the beliefs and practices of the Nation of Islam, The Moorish Science Temple of America and other identity based Muslim movements. Cultural *dakwah* came to focus on integrating Islam and Muslims into the mainstream of American society and culture.

Perhaps the two most important figures in both conventional and cultural *dakwah* in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century were Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Both came to Islam through the Nation of Islam, and

subsequently left it for a more inclusive Sunni Islam that was not rooted in African American identity politics.

Malcolm X (1925-1965) was born as Malcolm Little. His father was a Baptist minister and a supporter of Marcus Garvey. He was murdered by white supremacists in 1931. Malcolm was imprisoned for burglary between 1946 and 1952. He spent his time in prison reading voraciously and was introduced to the teachings of the Nation of Islam by his brother Reginald.<sup>39</sup> He joined the movement and changed his surname to X in keeping with Nation of Islam practice. Upon his release from prison, he became one of the movements most active and successful *dai*. He used print, radio and television as well as personal appearances to spread the message. Between 1952 and 1963 he founded many mosques and increased membership in the Nation of Islam from approximately 500 to 30,000.<sup>40</sup>

He became a media sensation and rapidly eclipsed his mentor Elijah Muhammad as the public voice of the Nation of Islam. He grew seriously dismayed with the organization upon learning of Elijah Muhammad's extramarital affairs in 1963. He left the Nation of Islam the following year and founded the Muslim Mosque, Inc. His 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca was a personal revelation and a turning point in the history of Islam in the

United States. It opened his eyes to the racially inclusivist teachings and ethnic diversity of Islam. He came to see Islam not as an African American religion, but as a world religion. After completing the *haj* Malcolm change his name again, this time to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.



Malcolm X

His transformation is apparent in a letter that he wrote after completing the *haj*. I have reproduced a substantial portion of it here because of the power of the message and because it speaks of a fundamental change in his views of race, religion and identity. Many Muslims describe the *haj* as a transformative experience. This was certainly the case for Malcolm X. In his case personal transformation had profound social and political consequences.

It is one of the most significant texts, not only of African American Islam, but also of Islam in the United States in general. It is both conventional and cultural *dakwah*. Malcom X was especially taken with the ways in which Islam rejects racism and the stark contrast between Muslim inclusivism and white

<sup>39</sup> X, Malcolm (1964). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Random House.

<sup>40</sup> Marable, Manning (2011). *Malcolm X. A Life of Reinvention*. New York: Viking.



Christian American exclusivism. The Muslim inclusivism he experienced in Mecca also led him to reject the racism of the Nation of Islam and to see Islam a path forward for all Americans.

I have been blessed to visit the Holy City of Mecca. I have made my seven circuits around the Ka'ba, led by a young *Mutawaf* named Muhammad. I drank water from the well of the Zam Zam. I ran seven times back and forth between the hills of Mt. Al-Safa and Al-Marwah. I have prayed in the ancient city of Mina, and I have prayed on Mt. Arafat.<sup>41</sup>

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white.<sup>42</sup>

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white'--but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam.<sup>43</sup> I have never

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<sup>41</sup> This reflects a mainstream view of the *hajj*. It, and the remainder of the letter, are free of the religious eclecticism typical of the Nation of Islam.

<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note that it was ritual practice rather than reasoned argument that leads to Malcolm's transformation.

<sup>43</sup> This is cultural *dakwah*. It is a call for America to understand Islam even if most Americans do not embrace it. The reference to eating together must be understood in light of American segregation. Generally speaking

before seen *sincere* and *true* brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.

You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to *re-arrange* much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to *toss aside* some of my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.

During the past eleven days, here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) --while praying to the *same* God--with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white.<sup>44</sup>And in the *words* and in the *actions* in the *deeds* of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.

We were *truly* all the same (brothers)--because their belief in one God had removed the white from their *minds*, the white from their *behavior*, and the white from their *attitude*.

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restaurants were strictly segregated. Attempts to integrate them were among the first symbolic acts undertaken by the Civil Rights movement at the time when Malcolm wrote.

<sup>44</sup> Nation of Islam theology holds that blonde hair and blue eyes are ugly and satanic.

I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in *reality* the Oneness of Man--and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their 'differences' in color.<sup>45</sup>

With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called "Christian" white American heart should be more receptive to a proven solution to such a destructive problem. Perhaps it could be in time to save America from imminent disaster--the same destruction brought upon Germany by racism that eventually destroyed the Germans themselves.

Each hour here in the Holy Land enables me to have greater spiritual insights into what is happening in America between black and white. The American Negro never can be blamed for his racial animosities--he is only reacting to four hundred years of the conscious racism of the American whites. But as racism leads America up the suicide path, I do believe, from the experiences that I have had with them, that the whites of the younger generation, in the colleges and universities, will see the handwriting on the walls and many of them will turn to the *spiritual* path of *truth*--the *only* way left to America to ward off the disaster that racism inevitably must lead to.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This is a *dakwah* of hope. It expresses sentiments similar to those of Christian Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Malcom X's dream of large numbers of white Americans accepting Islam has yet to be realized.

<sup>46</sup> Malcolm's expression of hope for young white Americans is another indication of the depth of his transformation. It is also important to note that white college students and Christian clergy played important roles

Never have I been so highly honored. Never have I been made to feel more humble and unworthy. Who would believe the blessings that have been heaped upon an *American Negro*? A few nights ago, a man who would be called in America a 'white' man, a United Nations diplomat, an ambassador, a companion of kings, gave me *his* hotel suite, *his* bed. ... Never would I have even thought of dreaming that I would ever be a recipient of such honors--honors that in America would be bestowed upon a King--not a Negro.<sup>47</sup>

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds.

Sincerely,  
El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz  
(Malcolm X)

In this letter Malcolm X continues to see Islam as an alternative to American racism, but in a very different way than he had previously. The Nation of Islam saw Islam as African American cultural property. Malcolm X now saw it as a religious alternative that could bring black and white Americans together.

Malcolm X lost none of his zeal for furthering the cause of African Americans, but came to link their cause and those of the people of the developing world, especially in Africa. He was among the first to suggest that the term *civil rights* be replaced with *human rights*.

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in the Civil Rights movement. American hotels were strictly segregated at the time Malcolm wrote.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts, Randy and Smith, Johnny (2016). *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X*, New York: Basic Books.

In the short time that remained to him El-Hajji Malik El-Shabazz traveled extensively in Africa, Europe the Middle East and the United States to spread this optimistic and indeed utopian vision of Islam. His days were numbered. Factions within the Nation of Islam had targeted him for assassination. He was gunned down by four of his former comrades on February 21<sup>st</sup> 1965.

Muhammad Ali (1942-2016) was born Cassius Clay in Louisville Kentucky. He was to become one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century. He won an Olympic Gold Medal in 1960 and was three times heavy weight boxing champion of the world and was known as “The Greatest.” His power outside the ring was nearly as great as it was inside. He became an influential voice first for the Nation of Islam, later for mainstream Sunni Islam and finally for Sufism He was also a political activist supporting civil rights and humanitarian causes and opposing militarism.

Growing up in the Jim Crow south, Ali experienced segregation and racial hatred first hand. He was moved towards social activism when he was refused service in a small shop even after winning an Olympic Gold Medal. His 1964 conversion to the Nation of Islam was the result the movement’s emphasis on African American racial pride and his friendship with Malcolm X. He first encountered the Nation of Islam in Chicago in 1959 and began attending meetings two years later. He met Malcolm X in 1962, who quickly became his spiritual guide. Elijah

Muhammad was almost like a father to him.

Ali publicly announced his conversion and became a spokesman for the Nation of Islam in 1964. At the time, he accepted the movements teachings about religious intolerance and racial segregation. Forty years later he explained that:

The Nation of Islam taught that white people were devils. I don't believe that now. I never really believed that. But when I was young, I had seen and heard so many horrible stories about the white man that this made me stop and listen.<sup>48</sup>

When Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, Muhammad Ali stayed with it. The two were estranged at the time of Malcolm X’s death, which Ali later deeply regretted. His experience on the *haj* in 1972 was similar to Malcolm X’s. He left the Nation of Islam in 1975 to embrace mainstream Sunni Islam. In 2005, he became a Sufi after reading the works of Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927), the founder of the Sufi Order in the West.<sup>49</sup> Towards the end of his life Ali said this about religions:

Rivers, ponds, lakes and streams. They have different names, but all contain water. Religions have different names but all contain truth.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ali, Muhammad (2004). *The Soul of a Butterfly: Reflections on Life's Journey*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>49</sup> “Muhammad Ali’s New Spiritual Quest,” *beliefnet* <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2016/06/09/How-Muhammad-Ali-made-his-Muslim-pilgrimage/stories/201606090033>

<sup>50</sup> The Telegraph June 4, 2016.

Despite, or perhaps partly because, of his prowess as a boxer, Ali strongly opposed war and political violence. In 1967, he refused induction into the United States armed forces because of his opposition to the Vietnam War. This made him a folk hero for Americans who shared his convictions and an arch-villain for those who supported the war. He tied opposition to the war with opposition to racism stating:

My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me,<sup>51</sup> they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father... Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail<sup>52</sup>.

Ali was consistent in his opposition to violence throughout his life, a position he linked with his Muslim faith. In 1990 personally negotiated the release of American hostages in Iraq. He was recognized by the United Nations as an Ambassador for Peace in 1998 and awarded the Medal of Freedom by US President George W. Bush in 2005.



**Muhammad Ali –  
Wearing a Nation of Islam Uniform**

Ali understood Islamist violence as being counter to the principles of Islam. His statements in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks New York and more recent Islamist violence center on both his belief that Islam is a religion of peace and the damage that they have done to cultural *dakwah* efforts.

People say a Muslim caused this (September 11) destruction. I am angry that the world sees a certain group of Islam followers who caused this destruction, but they are not real Muslims. They are racist fanatics who call themselves Muslims, permitting this murder of thousands.

I am a Muslim and there is nothing Islamic about killing innocent people in Paris, San Bernardino, or anywhere else in the world. True Muslims know that the ruthless violence of so called Islamic Jihadists goes against the very tenets of our religion.

We as Muslims have to stand up to those who use Islam to advance their own personal agenda. They have alienated many from learning about Islam. True Muslims know or should know that it goes against our religion to try and force Islam on anybody.

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<sup>51</sup> This is a reference to the use of dogs to control crowds by American police, not to Islamic strictures about canines.

<sup>52</sup> Calamur, Krishnadev (2016) "Muhammad Ali and Vietnam," *The Atlantic*.

Muhammad Ali continued his cultural *dakwah* efforts until shortly before his death on June 3, 2016. In one of his last public statements he called on American leaders to join in the effort to mainstream Islam in the United States.

Speaking as someone who has never been accused of political correctness, I believe that our political leaders should use their position to bring understanding about the religion of Islam and clarify that these misguided murderers have perverted people's views on what Islam really is.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusions

Cultural *dakwah* has been a prominent feature of African American Muslim Islam since the time when Dr. Sadiq arrived in the United States in 1921. Linking Islam with African American struggles against injustice and oppression played a vital part in the develop of Muslim identity movements in the African American community. African American Muslim movements like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam sought to empower African Americans but retained the racial separateness that was a basic aspect of the larger American cultural system. Establishing the *category* Islam as an element of the American religious mosaic established social and religious contexts in which more conventional forms of Sunni Islam that

reject racial categorizations could take root and grow.

Charismatic leaders have been central to this process. Prophet Noble Drew Ali, Wallace Fard Muhammad and Elijah Mohamed defined Islam as an alternative, assertive African American identity. Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali moved cultural *dakwah* beyond ethnic provincialism. They sought to transform African American Islam and bring it into the global Muslim community. Both became international celebrities. To both black and white American and global audiences their message, or at least part of it, is that there is no conflict between being Muslim and being American.

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<sup>53</sup> *Vox Policy and Politics*, June 4, 2016. <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/12/10/9885616/muhammad-ali-donald-trump-muslims> This was nearly certainly an oblique reference to Islamophobic statements by US President Donald Trump.

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