

# The Black Muslims in America

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Foreword by Gordon W. Allport

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### 3 Black Nationalism: The Minor Leagues

All black nationalist movements have in common three characteristics: a disparagement of the white man and his culture, a repudiation of Negro identity and an appropriation of "Asiatic" culture symbols. Within this framework, however, they take shape in a remarkable variety of creeds and organizations. The smallest groups range in temperament from the innocuous United African Nationalist Movement, with its New York City street-corner harangues, to the criminally trained, marijuana-smoking Ras Tafarians, who are known to have murdered at least six people: two British soldiers, a Chinese shopkeeper and three of their own number whose devotion to the cult had begun to flag.

The more influential black nationalist movements also seize upon varying interests as focal points for group identification or as vehicles of counteraggression against the white majority. One favorite focus is religion; another is political or politico-economic goals. The former has no immediate concern with a national state; the latter makes the creation of a state central to its appeal. These two emphases are perhaps best represented in the Moorish Science Temple movement of Noble Drew Ali and the Universal Negro Improvement Association of Marcus Garvey, both of which flourished about the time of World War I.

The Moorish Science movement was essentially religious; Garvey's UNIA was primarily political. The *raison d'être* of both was to devise some means of escaping the implications of being a Negro in a white-dominated society. Noble Drew sought a psychic escape: by changing their names and the symbols of their culture, his Moors hoped to change their social fortunes. For Garvey, the logical solution was to remove all American Negroes to an independent African state. Both men had substantial followings, but



neither did much to change the conditions that were ultimately responsible for whatever measure of success they could claim.

*Religious Nationalism: The Moorish Science Temples*

About 1913, a forty-seven-year-old North Carolina Negro named Timothy Drew established a "Moorish Science Temple" in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> From this seed grew a movement that, at its peak, had established temples in Detroit, Harlem, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and in numerous cities across the South. Membership may have been as high as twenty or thirty thousand during the lifetime of "the Prophet."

Drew never seems to have had a formal education, but at some point he apparently had been exposed to Oriental philosophy. He was particularly impressed by the lack of race consciousness in Oriental religious thought and saw in it a possible answer to the Negro's plight in a color-conscious America. If Negroes could somehow establish an identity with the Oriental peoples, whose religious philosophies either knew nothing of the "curse of Canaan"<sup>2</sup> or else found it irrelevant, they might become less susceptible to the everyday hazards of being "everyday-Negroes" in America.

In pursuing this goal, Drew did not allow himself to be troubled by the inconveniences of history. He simply decreed that, thenceforth, American Negroes were to be known as "Asiatics."

He became obsessed with the idea that salvation for the Negro people lay in the discovery by them of their national origin; i.e., they must know whence they came, and refuse longer to be called Negroes, black folk, colored people, or Ethiopians. They must henceforth call themselves Asiatics, to use the generic term, or, more specifically, Moors, or Moorish Americans.<sup>3</sup>

To document this ethnic transformation, he issued "Nationality and Identification Cards" to his followers. Each card bore the Islamic symbol (the star and crescent), an image of clasped hands, and a numeral "7" in a circle. It announced that the bearer honored "all the Divine Prophets, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and



Confucius" and pronounced upon him "the blessings of the God of our Father, Allah." It identified him as "a Moslem under the Divine Laws of the Holy Koran of Mecca, Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom, and Justice" and concluded with the assurance: "I AM A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES." Each card was validated by the subscription, "NOBLE DREW ALI, THE PROPHET."

Drew's movement spread west from New Jersey to Pittsburgh, Detroit and Chicago, and there were temples in a number of cities across the South. In Chicago the movement rapidly gained momentum and soon became a problem for law enforcement officials. The members of the cult felt an exaggerated sense of security and importance in their new "Asiatic" status, symbolized most openly in the red fezzes which the male members were required to wear at all times. But their social metamorphosis was not accepted by the whites, who saw no reason to relinquish their traditional racial constructs. The Moors' confidence, however, was not diminished. They were certain that the whites (or "Europeans") were soon to be destroyed and that the "Asiatics" would soon be in control.

A number of disturbances developed. The Moors, made conspicuous by their fezzes, walked the streets, treating white folk with open contempt. In various parts of the Middle West they became anathema to the police.

In Chicago, affairs reached the point where members of the cult would accost white people on the streets, and showing their membership cards or the button they wore in their coat lapels, would sing the praises of their prophet, now known as Noble Drew Ali, because he had freed them from the curse of European (white) domination.<sup>4</sup>

The cult members believed that the imminent destruction of the whites was signified by the appearance in the sky of a star within a crescent moon.

As the racial irritations cued by the Moors' aggressive behavior grew worse, Noble Drew Ali issued a warning to his followers to exercise more restraint. They were cautioned to "stop flashing [their] cards before Europeans" and to avoid making agitating speeches on their jobs. "We did not come to cause confusion," the Prophet observed. "Our work is to uplift the nation."



Despite Drew's sincerity and simple idealism, the Moorish Science movement eventually addressed itself to some new directions not anticipated in its founding philosophy. As is characteristic of mass movements, its growth and expansion began to attract better educated but less scrupulous individuals, who saw it as an irresistible opportunity for private gain and exploitation. Anxious to extend the movement and aware of his own limitations, Noble Drew Ali opened the door to these men; but the "new blood" proved to be costly indeed. The less discriminating followers of the Prophet—like their counterparts in other religious sects—were soon duped into buying various charms, relics, magical potions, pictures and spurious literature concerning their Asiatic heritage. The leaders grew rich off the credulous masses; and when it became apparent that Noble Drew Ali was the chief obstacle to a more complete exploitation, he was shunted aside. Eventually, he was killed.

The responsibility for the death of Noble Drew Ali has never been officially placed. During the struggle for power among the leaders of the cult, one leader was killed. Ali was not in Chicago at the time of the killing, but upon his return he was arrested and charged with murder by police officials, who were at best somewhat weary of his movement. He was never brought to trial, for he died mysteriously shortly after being released on bond. The cause of his death is variously attributed to a "third degree" given him while under arrest or to a subsequent beating administered by his rivals for power within the movement.

After the Prophet's death, the cult split into numerous smaller groups. It is no longer a potent force in the Negro community, though some temples remain active in the industrial cities of the North. Many present-day Moors believe that Noble Drew Ali is reincarnate in their present leaders, and the *Holy Koran* of the Moorish Holy Temple of Science continues to be the sacred book of the various sects. (The *Holy Koran*, not to be confused with the Quran of classical Islam, contains the teachings of the Prophet, along with various other esoteric materials.) Membership continues to be limited to "Asiatics"—that is, to non-Caucasians—who renounce the traditional category and the implications of being "colored" or "Negro." Each new member attaches the



term "el" or "bey" to his name in signification of his Asiatic status. Initiation fees are usually a dollar; stipulated dues are paid thereafter.

The cult considers itself Moslem, but it retains many of the familiar markings of Christianity. Jesus, for example, remains a prominent figure in the worship services; and hymns, although revised to appropriate the new teachings, retain the rhythmic chant forms of the familiar Negro spirituals. Love is taught as the guiding spirit of the universe: "the fallen sons and daughters of the Asiatic Nation of North America need to learn to love instead of hate; and to know of their higher self and lower self."

The Moors believe that "before you can have a God you must have a nationality" and that Noble Drew Ali, who was a prophet ordained of God, gave his people the North African state of Morocco to be their nation. In this connection, they attach great signification to names:

The name means everything; by taking the Asiatic's name from him and calling him Negro, black, colored, or Ethiopian, the European stripped the Moor of his power, his authority, his God, and every other worthwhile possession.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, each religion has its proper racial adherents, and religious faith should not cross racial lines:

Christianity is for the European (paleface); Moslemism is for the Asiatic (olive-skinned). When each group has its own peculiar religion, there will be peace on earth.

[However], Noble Drew Ali is a kindred personage and spirit to Confucius, Jesus, Buddha, and Zoroaster.<sup>6</sup>

In the Moors' worship services, there is none of the expressive fervor one associates with the stereotype of the lower-class Negro church. The services are subdued and quiet. All present are expected to pay careful attention; but there are few responses from the congregation, and even these are hardly audible. Meetings begin and end with undeviating punctuality, and the members are seated separately according to sex. Friday is considered the Sabbath day, but meetings are held on Wednesday and Sunday evenings as well. No baptism or communion is observed. The



faithful are required to pray daily at sunrise, noon and sunset, facing Mecca with hands upraised.

Strict personal morality is a keynote of the movement's teachings. The Moors greet their followers with the salutation "Peace!" or "Islam!" As among the Black Muslims, great emphasis is placed upon the husband's responsibility as protector and provider of his family, while women are enjoined to be good homemakers and to obey their husbands. Divorce is discouraged. Monogamy is the only form of marriage recognized, and marriage ceremonies are performed by the "Grand Sheik," or Governor, in charge of the local temple. Most secular entertainments are forbidden, as is the use of cosmetics, alcohol and tobacco. Meat and eggs are taboo. Personal cleanliness is stressed, but men are not expected to shave.

Despite the racial boisterousness of some of its adherents, the Moorish Science movement did not consider itself "radical." On the contrary, the Moors offered themselves as the nucleus around which a world of truth, peace, freedom and justice must be built. Despite their hostility to whites, they stressed obedience and loyalty to the flag of the United States, so long as they were to live in America. For the Moors have two homelands. Noble Drew, the Reincarnation of Mohammed, gave them Morocco as the seat of their Nation. But the dark people of the world are also native to the continent of North America, which is now under European dominion. They have no choice but to submit to the harsh rule of the whites until the whites' time to reign comes to an end.

A few Moorish temples remain scattered among the Negro ghettos today. The congregations believe that they are still led by Noble Drew Ali, with each present Sheik a reincarnation of their revered founder. Many Moors, however, were among the earliest converts to the Black Muslim Movement. They feel quite at home in this new nationalism, which continues them in their familiar "Asiatic" religion without requiring them to love the "Europeans." In fact, they may now look forward to the predicted destruction of their enemies with increased assurance, for Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger—unlike Noble Drew Ali—is not a man to compromise.



awakening effect on the American Negro community. Yet Garveyism lives on not really as a movement but as a symbol—a symbol of the militant Negro nationalism which so many black Americans see as their only alternative to eternal frustration and despair.

*Preparing the Way for Allah*

By the late 1920s, then, Noble Drew Ali was dead and Marcus Garvey deported. Their movements, shorn of their charismatic leadership, were in rapid decline. But there was no change in the experience that gave rise to both movements—the experience of being black among a white majority. This condition was, if anything, more intolerable than ever, for the Negro masses had been vividly reminded of their human dignity and their proud racial heritage. The failure of the Moorish and Garveyite movements left in the Negro lower class a constrained silence, a vacuum of extremist protest against racial indignities that were soon to be aggravated by the tensions of the Depression. Either America had to come quickly to its senses and live up to its democratic ideals, or a new black nationalist movement would move in to fill that vacuum.

It was just at this time, in the summer of 1930, that Wallace D. Fard appeared in Detroit. Many of those who first came under his spell had been followers of Garvey or Noble Drew. Fard was not alone, of course, in seeking to win over the masses already conditioned to black nationalism, especially those who had flocked to the black, green and crimson banner of the UNIA. Other black nationalist groups were also active, among them the National Movement for the Establishment of a Forty-Ninth State, the National Union of People of African Descent, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia and the United African Nationalist Movement. But none of these groups had a leader with Fard's charisma or his ability to seize on the Moorish and Garveyite passions and transform them into a new force, in which religious and political energies were fused. Fard's movement was destined to become the vanguard of black nationalism and, by solving the problem of succession on which earlier movements had foundered, to give that ancient ambition a fresh permanence and power.