

Five Minutes to Nation Time:

Building the Nation of Islam

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Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam

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Abstract:

There was a metaphor Malcolm X was once taught by Elijah Muhammad; it was an illustration of how best to represent Islam but served as well to describe the entire the Nation the two men had set out to create. Elijah Muhammad instructed Malcolm that if a man drank a dirty glass of water, a glass that was not only unclean but downright poisonous; were someone to tell him this dirty water was unfit to drink the man would not believe him. The better strategy was simply to drink fresh water oneself and demonstrate the benefits through ones life and actions. And here outlined was the strategy of the Nation of Islam (NOI). If the Black Revolution's goal was equality via separation from white society, than Mr. Muhammad and Malcolm X would have to physically build the very Black Nation espoused in their teachings modeled precisely on the theories they preached. What would separate the Nation of Islam from virtually every other adversarial group to emerge in the history of American resistance to the power structure was that it would fashion a viable alternative that legitimized its rhetoric. Every group before and after NOI in the history of this country have used a myriad of protest tactics for the most part unsuccessfully because they demanded power without proof. By this I mean the NOI's most effective demonstration of Black Power, ten years before it was chic to declare it; were its schools, its bakeries, its markets, and its economic programs of community control. This paper seeks to document that NOI above and beyond any adversarial organization was the most successful at not just articulating, but addressing through alternatives; the plight of Black People in America. This paper is about the Nation the Malcolm X gave his life to build. Its purpose is to illustrate that true power is won not in protest or in an armed revolution; it is the construction of an alternative; it is in nation time.

Beginnings

A community lacking in resources can build a grassroots foundation cemented behind belief and use it to attract the necessary personnel capable of spreading its message. It can also harness the followers of the movement into an economic force that can manage their own businesses and reinvest its capital for a political purpose. The Nation of Islam was the direct fusing of a program of economic self determinism, Black

Nationalist separatism, and religious faith. The product itself was a Nation; that is to say a self contained society within the United States, the **Lost-Found Nation of Islam** (NOI), functioning with its own laws, businesses, faith, and army. At it's height in the 1970's over 100,000 Black Americans were members of this Nation. Today a comparable number of men and women compose America's largest indigenous Muslim population. Yet long before men like Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X turned an obscure Detroit based cult into a religious movement that captured the hearts and minds of tens of thousands of Black Americans three visionary leaders would lay the political and religious underpinnings of the NOI.

The theoretical foundation of the Nation of Islam grew out of two distinctive movements preaching various visions of the Black Nationalist ideal: the **United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)** of Marcus Garvey and the **Moorish Science Temples** of Noble Drew Ali.

UNIA preached that the Black race was superior to the whites. Garvey declared that Black people should return to Africa and built a nation than would span across the continent. To do this he fashioned an organization that took on the trappings of the future nation he sought to create. UNIA taught Pan Africanist ideas, encouraged Black economic development, and dealt with the White race as the enemy other. With over a million members internationally, UNIA was the pioneer Black Nationalist formation that would set the standard for all future attempts at mobilizing the Black Diaspora toward the creation of independent Black states¹. In short, Marcus Garvey and UNIA build the theoretical foundation of the Black Nationalist movement. The NOI took its political aspirations from the ideas of this movement but concentrated on the practical steps of forming a nation in Diaspora instead of the idealized location of Africa².

If UNIA was instrumental in giving Black America's a distinct political identity revolving around a nation, Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temples crafted a religious identity separate from the numerous and established Christian churches which catered to the spiritual needs of the Black community.

His followers would be called Asiatics-this philosophy in addition to the African nationalist concepts of Garvey, was in effect a psychological antidote to the presence of white Christian America. The problem of white racism was being addressed by giving Black people knowledge of Africa, and by giving them a new identity (Rashad, p.66).

As conceived by Ali: Christianity was the White Man's religion taught over the course of slavery and colonialism. It was an ideology of inherent servitude revolving around White Prophets, a White messiah, and White guidelines on who would enter Heaven. Ali rejected Christianity and substituted it for what Curtis calls: **particularist Islam**. The crafting of Islam tailored to the plight of the Black community.

Ali began Identifying the Black people as Asiatic Muslims and crafting a religious nationalism around an entirely new concept of nation and self divorced from Christian teachings. Members of the Moorish Science Temples were given "real" African names, identity cards, and were instilled with belligerent and confrontational attitude toward

¹ Noted in **The History of Islam and Black Nationalism in the Americas**, Adib Rashad, pp.63-66.

² C. Eric Lincoln noted that at various times Elijah Muhammad expressed different hypothetical locations for the Black Nation including both Africa and seven to ten states in the America South West.

whites. After Ali was murdered the Moorish Science Temples degenerated into a marketing scheme for Asiatic trinkets³, but the idea of Blacks as Muslims did not go away.

In the summer of 1930 a man named Master Fard Muhammad, (also called W.R. Fard or Wallace D. Fard) who claimed to be Noble Drew Ali reincarnated, began selling Asiatic merchandise to poor Blacks in Detroit. Over the course of these economic interactions Fard proclaimed three basic teachings that would become the bedrock of the NOI. First, God had a name and that name was Allah. Second, the White man was the devil incarnate. And third, that the so-called Negroes were the Asiatic Black Race, the cream of planet Earth. Fard taught that the Black race's true religion was Islam, their true language was Arabic, and that the Black race could only achieve freedom if they separated into an all Black State. These theories were outlined in his book the **Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the so-called Negroes' Problem** and this book became the core teachings from which Elijah Muhammad would build his Nation. The NOI attracted 8,000 followers between 1930 and 1933. Its chief minister was a man born Elijah Poole who after declaring that W. D. Fard was actually Allah himself was elevated to the name Elijah Muhammad.

Fard managed to seize on Moorish and Garveyite passions and transform them into a new dynamic force, in which religious, economic, racial, and political energies were fused. Fard's chief convert, Elijah Muhammad, was wise enough to see similarities between Garveyism and Drew Ali's movement. He regarded Fard as the highest missionary for Black people. Fard's approach to the Black problem was based on the need to extricate Black people from white Christianity and white idol worship (Rashad, p.70).

Idol worship in this case being White dictated conceptions of freedom through integration. When Fard disappeared in 1933 infighting began among his ministers ending with Elijah Muhammad in charge of the largest Muslim faction. After this power struggle occurred Muhammad promptly began the official deification of Fard as Allah and elevated himself to level of prophet hood.

The Religion

It is important to state that NOI was a movement first and a religion second. Identity politics were solidified with Black Nationalist teachings. While many of the external trappings of the NOI loosely resembled those of the Islamic faith there were radical doctrinal differences that made the sect completely incompatible with the teachings of Sunni Orthodox Islam.

The Official Mythology of the NOI was that 6800 Years ago the Evil Doctor Yacub was exiled with 59,999 of his followers to an Island called Patmos, in the Aegean Sea. Through genetic engineering Yacub created the white race to enslave the Black Race. White people were inherently evil and were destined to rule for 6000 years until 1914⁴. On the day of Armageddon a great race war was to erupt in North America and a Black Muslim Nation will emerge. W. D. Fard was Allah himself and Elijah Muhammad was his Prophet.

³ Noted in **Inside the Nation of Islam**, Vibert L. White, p.10.

⁴ Noted in **Inside the Nation of Islam**, Vibert L. White Jr., pp.187-188.

In relation to the praxis of Islam the five pillars of the faith were slightly adjusted. The first pillar of Allah as God was consistent in rhetoric but not in theory. As is noted by the Black Muslim writer Amin bin Qasim Nathari, the main divergence from traditional Islam was that Allah could not have come to Earth in the form of Fard because Allah does not have human characteristics. To give Allah these characteristics would be to commit the Muslim sin of ***Shirk***; **proscribing human features to God or placing others as its equal**. It should be also noted that Sunni Orthodox Muslims believe that the original Prophet Muhammad born on the Arabian Peninsula received the final revelation from God. Elijah Muhammad's claims were quite blasphemous to most Muslims⁵.

In regards to the other pillars of the faith, prayer took place five times a day, but in English not Arabic, not involving prostrations, and not on the lunar adjusted times of Sunni Islam. The Holy fast of Ramadan was observed, but it was always in December when daylight hours were shortest. The *Zakat* or alms of 2.5% of a person's savings was raised substantially to 1/3 of their income. The Hajj pilgrimage was a symbol of status but not a culminating point on ones life journey. In many ways the Black Muslim had a stricter moral code than your average Sunni Orthodox Muslim. In terms of standard discipline: it was forbidden to eat pork, drink alcohol, use narcotics, or engage in promiscuity. Extra disciplines invented by Elijah Muhammad included no make up for women, no dancing, no gambling, no sports, no long vacations from work, no excessive slumber, no over eating, or the smoking of cigarettes⁶.

Some potential converts in the lower class reject the movement because of its Spartan requirements. Women tend to object to the Muslim ban on cosmetics and to various other restrictions pertaining to dress. The woman's liberation movement is derided in many quarters as a deceptive ploy intended to distract Blacks from vigorously pursuing their real interest, which is the liberation from racism. As a result, the women's liberation movement has no real discernable effect upon the response of Black women to Islam. The requirement of strict sexual morality and the categorical prohibition of alcohol and tobacco alienate many young men for whom the Muslim's religious and racial teachings are not a formidable barrier. Those who join the Movement tend to have been so impressed with the futility of established techniques for improving their lot that they are willing to make the required adjustments in personal behavior in exchange for a new emotional outlook (Lincoln, p.174).

The clearest deviation from Sunni Islam was the racist doctrines of the NOI. Orthodox Muslims believe in a universal brother/sisterhood of the human race and that all people are equal before Allah regardless of their skin color. That the NOI could suggest that the White race was excluded from Islam because of color went against the core values of the religion.

For nearly all Muslims outside the NOI, Muhammad's unique Islamic dispensationalism directly contradicted the most basic beliefs of any acceptable interpretation of Sunni or Shi'a Islam (Curtis, p.79).

⁵ Noted in **Islam in America**, Amin bin Qasim Nathari, pp.168-178.

⁶ Noted in **Black Muslims in America**, C.E. Lincoln, p.70.

But at the time of the NOI's rise in the 1960's the Muslim immigrant population in America was less than 35,000. Therefore even though excluded from the Sunni Orthodox community; Black Muslims were the defacto majority Muslim population in the United States. And as they were excluded from the Sunni community in the U.S. they were lavished with attention from Muslim third world leaders such as Gamal Nasser. Their strength and potential was not overlooked by the Third World. Apologists such as Abdul Basit Naeem and the Asian-African DRUMS organization championed the NOI as a stepping stone⁷. Arabs like the famous Palestinian Shaikh Diab taught Arabic in the 40 schools operated by NOI and Muslim students from abroad visited their mosques.

There has been some debate as to how to define the movement in religious terms. A Church has a priest; that is to say a non-divinely sanctioned spokesperson for an established religion. A Sect has a prophet; that is to say a person claiming divine revelation to modify the tenets of an existing church. A Cult has a leader claiming any one of numerous things. Defining a Cult as a small group of people unrelated to any religious institution and tied together only by common religious emotions and needs; NOI fits a religious classification somewhat between Cult and Sect. While it was relatively small compared to the nation's major religious bodies, the NOI was larger than most American denominations, sects, and cults⁸. More than fifty protestant denominations, for example, had fewer than ten congregations each, and more than half the sects in the nation had only 7,000 members or less. With its 100,000 members the religion of the NOI fused Black Nationalist politics with careful doses of Black Supremacy and Islamic ritual to shape a faith to build the Nation upon.

Mass Movement

The Nation was built around the idea of movement. Its religion has the harnessing force to reshape a people via a mission. The creation of Nation was the objective to which the movement struggled. Its goal was to uplift and redeem the so-called Negro and give him a cause to rally around.

The climate of America for oppressed people during this period, particularly for African-American people, was hostile at best and debilitating at worst. The civil right movement was basically ineffective in its efforts to affect a real change in the status of African Americans. The climate was ripe for anyone calling to a sense of self-worth, self-empowerment and the overall uplift of the plight of African Americans. Any movement that did not take the "turn the other cheek" or "we shall overcome" approach to our situation was certainly a unique and welcome change. The grassroots in America had grown tired of the status quo (Nathari, p.26-27)

The Nation of Islam revolved around Elijah Muhammad's orders and direction disseminated by a loyal cadre of ministers; the most vocal proponent and catalyst for expansion on the national level was Malcolm X. The Black Muslims worked with in a strict hierarchy and chain of command with all disagreements handled behind closed doors and all direction flowing from Mosque #2 in Chicago from the mouth of Elijah

⁷ Noted in **Islam in Black America**, Edward E. Curtis IV, and p.80.

⁸ Noted in **Black Muslims in America**, C. E. Lincoln, pp.238-241.

Muhammad. Every Black Muslim community was organized around the Mosque. They served as focal points for classes, nightly meetings, and religious services and were the administrative hubs of the NOI. Every Mosque had a minister trained by Elijah Muhammad and a Division of the Fruit Islam; the security and moral police of the Nation.

Members of the NOI are recruited by groups of Muslim brothers that go “Fishing for the Dead”; a conversational style of target recruiting at specific locations throughout the Black community. The overall demographic of the NOI shows that most members brought in were young, male, lower class, and almost wholly American born⁹.

Women had an obviously subordinated role in the movement and were not included in decision making bodies of FOI or local mosques. They were enrolled in one or all of the three groups open to females; the General Civilization Class, the Muslim Girl Training class, and the Vanguard. The role of all three groups was the socialization of Muslim women as proper homemakers, mothers, and wives¹⁰. An almost obsessive focus was placed on conservative gender roles meant to rehabilitate the Black family unit. This is not to say the role of Muslim women was restricted to the domestic sphere. They were however found as secretaries throughout the organizational infrastructure handling most day to day functions directed by male Muslims and were present throughout the business infrastructure of the nation¹¹.

The Messenger’s pragmatic, logical; self-help program to get Black people in large urban ghettos off their knees in the service of others was grounded by structured classes as much as by the rhetoric that reinforced it. However, the program would not have worked had it not been for the efforts of Black Muslim women in the home managing of day to day tasks (West, p.193).

Many female converts found subordination preferable to neglect. This does not change the fact that from beginning to end the NOI enforced a principled patriarchy cloaked in the guise of protectionism.

New members were subject to the strictest of moral guidelines and plugged immediately into classes to teach the theory of the Nation along with numerous weekly meetings to craft a new Black Muslim identity. The ultimate appeal of the movement is the chance to participate in a power strong enough to overcome the white power structure and subordinate it in turn.

Black Nationalism is more than courage and rebellion; it is a way of life. It is an implicit rejection of the “alien” white culture and explicit rejection of the symbols of that culture, balanced with an exaggerated and undiluted pride in the “black” culture. It involves a drastic reappraisal not only of present realities but also of the past and future. The Black Nationalist revises history (or corrects it as he would say) to establish that today’s black men are descended from glorious ancestors, from powerful and enlightened conquerors. This reconstruction of history may reach ridiculous extremes; and it can never be accepted by white men, who, to bolster their own security, must perceive history as a record of white men’s achievements. But

⁹ Noted in *The Black Muslims in America*, C. E. Lincoln, pp.24-25

¹⁰ Noted in *Black Muslims in America*, C.E. Lincoln, pp.33-34.

¹¹ Noted in *Nation Builders: Female Activism in the NOI*, Cynthia S’Thembile West, pp.185-210.

a proud history is essential to the Black Nationalist's self respect. Essential, too is the certainty of a brilliant future, in which the inherent superiority of his race will triumph and he will rule the world (Lincoln, p???)

The most committed male members are admitted into the Fruit Of Islam (FOI): a highly secretive paramilitary organization that guards the NOI mosques, ministers, members and enforces discipline. The FOI has a section in every Temple made up of the best physically and psychologically conditioned Muslim brothers between the ages of sixteen to 35. FOI serve two duties; security and discipline. They are organized into Sections run by a captain composed of squads under the command of a lieutenant. FOI do not report to local minister they report directly to Mr. Muhammad in Chicago. It was never apparent that the FOI drilled in small arms nor stockpiled an arsenal so Black Muslim rhetoric on the coming race war was carefully toned down whenever FOI was mentioned¹². The force therefore worked as the security at Mosques and rallies as well as kept recruits in line with the moral code of the movement.

The FOI conducted trials of Muslims that violated the moral code of the NOI. Trials were closed and accused were unable to offer a defense. In a religious offence the Minister pronounced sentence while moral issues were dealt with by the FOI Captain. Sentences included, Class C: Performing Labor at a mosque or a designated place for a period of time, or, Class F: Suspension from the movement and alienation from all its members and institutions.

The Black Muslim movement functioned with a strict centralized leadership that could get its members to act in unison. The movement itself gave its members a new identity around the creation of the Black Nation. Using Whites as the enemy other the Black Muslims took the radical notion of racial separatism and used it harness the economic force of its members. The business infrastructure they created had no parallel past or present. The NOI's members realized that if they were to be nation they needed businesses, factories, and land. In short the Mass Movement was harnessed for the economic betterment of its members.

Economic Development

The Foundation of the Black Nation is the NOI concept of GO FOR SELF. The basis of this was to build a Black nation out of the Black ghetto with all its own intuitions and economic infrastructure. Muhammad set out to generate from the NOI membership the funds needed to fuel this undertaking. Erdman Beyon observed of the Muslims in Detroit:

At the time of their first contact with the Prophet, practically all of the members of the cult were recipients of public welfare, unemployed, and living in the most deteriorated areas of Negro Settlement in Detroit. At the present time, there is no known case of unemployment among these people. Practically all of them are working in the automobile and other factories. They no longer live in the slum section...but rent homes in some of the best economic areas in which Negroes have settled. They tend to purchase more expensive furniture, automobiles, and clothes than do their neighbors even in those areas of higher-class residency (Lincoln, pp.24-25)

¹² As Noted in **History of the Nation of Islam**, Elijah Muhammad, p.20-21.

The NOI demanded employment of its members. Members were encouraged to live frugally and save money for future business endeavors. Members were required to dress neat, be punctual, and demonstrate a tough work ethic even for white employers. This rigid discipline became the backbone for the new Black businessmen that emerged from the Nation. Muhammad invested the *zakat* tax to build schools, homes, and lay economic foundations for the Black Muslim community. All contributed to a greater economic share for the Black Muslims.

The Muslim leaders tend to live and to build their temples and business in the areas from which they draw their major support- the heart of the black ghetto. This ghetto houses the most dissident and disinherited, the people who wake up to society's kick in the teeth each morning and fall exhausted with a parting kick each night. These are the people who are ready for revolution-any kind of revolution-and Muhammad astutely builds his temples in their midst. Furthermore, in the segregated Black ghetto, the illusion of a "Black Nation" within a surrounding and hostile white nation takes on a semblance of a reality (Lincoln, p.27).

Members bought collectively; sponsored each others businesses and did not spend money with merchants living outside or pariah to the community. This policy of controlled reinvestment relied on NOI membership to use their money at NOI businesses¹³. The NOI hosted a series of Black business conferences and summits to better inform the Black community on how to spend their money with their people. Elijah Muhammad was able to harness the buying power of 100,000 members to build an NOI economic empire to support the cause of nationhood¹⁴.

Every Muslims was expected to give a fixed percentage of their income to the Movement each year. This percentage was set at 1/3 of all earning, but probably not always that high. Temples also collect money for a variety of funds; many local and six for national purposes. Four earmarked for real estate, public relations, official travel, new cars; and two; one with no designation collected on Feb. 26th; Fard's Birthday, and one is a discretionary fund for Elijah Muhammad¹⁵. This was a massive pool of wealth at Elijah Muhammad's disposal and he successfully translated it into the NOI economic framework.

The NOI operated Grocery Stores, Laundromats, and barbershops. It bought over ten thousand acres of Farmland and used them to set up a vast industry of animal slaughter and agriculture to be sold via its own chain of supermarkets. Beef, Lamb, Fryers, Dairy, Eggs, Produce, and White Fish imported from Peru were all links in a vast chain of NOI controlled food industries. The "Your Supermarket" Chain sold wholesome Hilal food in Black communities across the country. The Salaam Restaurant Chain served high end food at affordable prices while the Shabazz Bakery Chain turned out hundreds of thousands of the nationally renowned Black Bean Pies. Muslim Retail Outlets sold

¹³ Noted in **Nation Builders: Female Activism in the Nation of Islam**, Cynthia S'Themble West, p.190.

¹⁴ Noted in **Accomplishments of the Muslims**, Muhammad Speaks Newspaper

¹⁵ Noted in **Black Muslim in America**, C.E. Lincoln, p.20.

Muslim produced apparel. The distribution of the Muhammad Speaks Newspaper was 500,000 in 1975 making it at that time the largest independent Black Newspaper in the country¹⁶.

The Black Muslims were proud of their technicians. Sound and recording equipment, stenographers, secretaries, excellent photo corps and filmmakers formed a back bone of a new proficient Black-controlled media. The NOI's infrastructure was supported by thousands outside the movement and was a symbol for the Black community as a whole of what could be accomplished with race solidarity.

Conclusion

The Nation envisioned by Elijah Muhammad and built by Malcolm X was used to lift 100,000 people out of poverty and indignity. The NOI brought up a strong and developed sense of race pride and race solidarity that crafted among its members a how-to conception of moral rehabilitation and economic opportunity. By the time of Elijah Muhammad the tiny Detroit Cult was a national religious body as well as a multi-million dollar business operation. His son Wallace transformed the Nation shortly after to the Sunni Orthodox body that it is to say. In essence the movement was over; it had been brought in line with the root of its theology.

Through the reorganizing, denationalizing, decentralizing, and orthodoxing of the Nation of Islam into the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, Wallace D. Muhammad has changed the most powerful and feared Black Nationalist group into an Orthodox Islamic religion (Marsh, p.70).

But the NOI was an experiment in American history. That an identity could be shaped from a religious community to achieve a wide range of political goals outside the America state apparatus was proved by this movement. By amalgamating religious teachings with a political vision the NOI built its nation to obtain what was not offered in the available avenues of change at that time. As stated by C.E. Lincoln; it was not a matter of importance what the actual religion was, the NOI used faith to build a movement and used its movement to improve the lot of its people on the ground. The NOI stands as an example not just of faith based organizing; but of religious nationalism tangibly translated to providing the things the poor of our country had long gone without.

¹⁶ Noted in **The Nation of Islam**, Steven Tsoukalas, p.76.

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