Summer Semester 2015

RELIGION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Term Paper

ALLAH'S OWN COUNTRY

BLACK NATIONALISM, THE NATION OF ISLAM, AND AMERICAN MUSLIM IDENTITY

Steffen Adrian Wöll

December 29, 2015

UNIVERSITY OF LEIPZIG
INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN STUDIES
BEETHOVENSTR. 15, 04107 LEIPZIG

Prof. Dr. Hartmut Keil

Against the background of the San Bernardino shootings and the resulting political quarrel about allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S., a multitude of critical questions about the relationship and compatibility of American and Muslim identity have surfaced. Conjuring up memories of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Republican contester Donald Trump has gone as far as to propose banning people of Islamic faith from entering the United States altogether (Saul 2015). Ostensibly, many objections to Muslim immigration seem to be related to potential violence of radicalized Islamic groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State, often connected to fears of backlash from the nation's failed foreign policy, most notably the "war on terror" and "Arab Spring" that left large parts of the Middle East in disarray. Reservations against Islam might also be explained by the image of the United States as a monolithically Christian nation whose social, cultural, and political norms seem firmly embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In fact, although the fault lines of the "religious marketplace" have deepened in recent decades, which saw an ever-growing number of nonaffiliated atheistic or agnostic "nones," in 2014 over seventy percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians, more than in any other Western nation (PewResearchCenter 2015).

What contributors to this debate usually overlook, however, are the religious dynamics of black Americans, which are of vital importance for the nation's history with Islam. Particularly after 9/11, the common rhetoric "insists on asserting that Islam is a foreign and transplanted religion" (Abdurraqib 2010, 174). In reality, however, of the around six million Muslims in the U.S., over forty percent are African Americans (Jackson 2005, 23). In part, these numbers go back to early twentieth century Islamic groups like Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple of America and Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement. The Black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s saw many black communities divided into two camps that, while working towards similar ends, proposed different methods to reach their goals. On the one hand, Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated nonviolent civil disobedience and the reconciliation between black and white Americans based on their shared Christian beliefs. On the other side of the spectrum, the Nation of Islam (NOI) with its prominent figures Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X rejected Christianity as the chief instrument of white supremacy and saw self-defense against oppressive white structures as legitimate. For them, conversion to Islam was a powerful way to carve out a new and self-confident black identity that is able to unite all nonwhite people under its banner. The Black Muslim identity was seen as morally and racially superior to white Christianity with its guilt-laden history of colonialism, slavery, and genocide. The present paper looks at African American Islam and investigates the role of Black Muslim identity in ongoing discussions about the compatibility of Christian ideology and Islam in the United States. I expect to find that the NOI's Muslim identity is often discarded as merely a veil that is used to conceal the group's radical political goals, subsumed under the term black nationalism. I argue that this position dilutes the long-standing history and achievements of American Black Muslim communities and serves to uphold the myth of Islam as a foreign religion of immigrants.

During the years of the Great Depression whose economic plight was hitting African Americans with full force, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad began advocating a curious new doctrine in Detroit's black communities. A man of obscure personal background—opinions range from him being "a Jamaican, a Palestinian, an Arab […], a Turk, an Indian, and even […] a Jew" (Ansari 1981, 139)—he peddled silk door-to-door while preaching black emancipation and black supremacy under the banner of Islam. Describing whites as "blue-eyed devils" and "cave men," Fard identified himself as the Mahdī, i.e. the prophesied Godly redeemer who rules before Judgement Day and rids the world of all evil, including the "poison book" that is the Bible (Martin 2004, 421).[1] Under Fard, the Nation of

[1]It is debated if he saw himself as God (Allah) or merely as an incarnation of God (cf. Ansari 1981, 139).

Islam gained a considerable following and founded a number of temples, schools, and local businesses, which generated sizable revenue. The NOI's promotion of empowerment through self-reliance and education were inspired by Marcus Garvey and his ideas of self-improvement and Booker T. Washington's demands for education and social reform (Chande 2008, 223). The movement's key methods to liberate so-called Blackamericans from the yoke of white oppression were strict religious and personal discipline, including the eschewal from smoking, alcohol, and pork.

After his sudden disappearance in 1934, Fard was succeeded by his closest disciple Elijah Muhammad who henceforth acted as the messenger of Fard's teachings. Born as Elijah Poole, he was an unemployed factory worker from Georgia with little formal education. Elijah lead the Nation until his death in 1975, having founded some seventy-five temples across the U.S. and accumulated considerable financial assets. Under his leadership, the NOI evolved into a mass movement with its newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* reaching a monthly circulation of 2.5 million in the 1960s. Especially after Malcolm X—born as Malcolm Little, the charismatic son of a civil rights activist and convicted pimp and drug dealer—joined the movement in 1952, civil rights and black nationalism became the main focus. As Abdin Chande points out, the NOI "sought to promote a new identity born out of the peculiar experience of living in America as a black person, under conditions of racism, segregation, and inferiority status in society" (2008, 223-24). After Elijah's death in 1975, his son Wallace Muhammad tried to steer the NOI in the direction of traditional, Sunni-oriented Islam, which caused a schism among its members and the separation of Muhammad's reformed American Muslim Community from the NOI. In the years after 1977, Louis Farrakhan successfully rebuilt the NOI, founding chapters in over 120 American cities and opening foreign branches in London, Paris, Ghana, and the Caribbean.[2]

Following Samaa Abdurraqib, the current anti-Muslim rhetoric relies on the narrative that "Muslim[s] living in the United States must be foreign-born, recently arrived, or, at most, the product of immigrant parents. Muslims as U.S. citizens are highly problematic and somewhat illogical within anti-Muslim/Islamophobic rhetoric" (2010, 181). As a result, "authentic" Muslims are defined as those foreign-looking immigrants from the Middle East, whose religion is often considered as a hostile intrusion into America's homogenous Christian landscape, which is already under the threat of a Millennial generation of religiously detached "nones." Because American-born native (Black) Muslims do not correlate to this myth of Islamic otherness, they are excluded from the public discourse of the threat of American "Islamization." To achieve this, some scholars have depicted Islam as "a convenient umbrella label" for the Nation of Islam "to distinguish the […] movement […] with a belief system that represented a cocktail mixture of proto-Islam, Christianity and even pseudo-scientism" (Chande 2008, 224). Hence, it seems that the marginalization of its members as "pseudo," "quasi," or "fake" Muslims is conducted through defining the movement as pursuing mainly political goals through racial politics. Thus, instead of its religious teachings, its advocacy of black supremacy and black nationalism are commonly depicted as the cornerstones of the NOI.[3]

To fit this characterization, its members' self-identification as Muslims has often been discredited as a mere strategy to advance their subversive political and racial goals. Converting to Islam is discounted as a misguided act of dissent and radicalism that only seeks to subvert the dominant Judeo-Christian ideology. The decision to convert to Islam is thus seen as having barely any virtue of its own. Even more, it turns into a blatant contradiction because it actually

---

[2]In 2010, Farrakhan publicly embraced Dianetics courses, certified by the Church of Scientology, "committed to restoring freedom and wiping hell from the face of this planet" (A. Muhammad 2013).

[3]The same is true for the NOI's supposed amalgamation with figures like Amiri Baraka and Black Power organizations that emerged at the beginning of the 1970s like the Congress of African People, the African Liberation Support Committee, and the National Black Assembly (cf. Woodard 1999, 160).

depends on those institutions which it pretends to combat, white dominance and Christianity, as its life-giving counterparts. On a first glance, this notion of systemic antagonism as the NOI's basis of existence appears not entirely inaccurate. After all, the headline of a 2012 issue of *Muhammad Speaks* asks its readers in a straight-out racist tone, "*When will Black People Learn? White People Really are!* The Real 'Guilty Blue-Eyed' Devil."[4] However, a closer investigation reveals that the notion of the NOI as a pseudo-religion relies on a binary division that is troubled with a number of deep contradictions.

The most important problem is the underlying idea of the epistemological breakup of politics and theology, meaning that a group must choose to engage fully either with worldly or other-worldly matters to appear serious and "authentic" in either category. A prominent example for the advocacy of such a dichotomy is C. Eric Lincoln's *The Black Muslims in America*, written in 1961 and still regarded as a standard reference for the ideology of the Nation of Islam. Generally, Lincoln suggests that "religious values have [only] secondary importance" for the NOI (1994, 26). Instead, he defines group solidarity, black nationalism, and "defensive response[s] to to external forces—hostile forces that threaten their creative existence" as its primary objectives (ibid. 43). As a consequence of his analysis, Islamic theology and Muslim identity take a back seat to the racialist ideology of black supremacy. They therefore function merely as a metaphysical device that increases the legitimacy and political bargaining power of the NOI by providing it with the protected status of a religious group. "So long as the movement keeps its color identity," Lincoln suggests, "it could discard all its Islamic attributes—its name, its prayers to Allah, its citations from the Qur'an, everything 'Muslim,' without substantial risk to the appeal to the black masses" (ibid. 210). Within the dynamics of the NOI, he writes, the teachings of Islam only serve to conceal the political nature of the organization, whose members "are grateful for a mystique, especially a dignified religious mystique that rationalizes their resentments and their hatreds, rendering them spiritual virtues in a cosmic war of good against evil" (ibid. 46).

Lincoln asserts that the group's main goal had always been the production of political consciousness and group solidarity within the black urban milieu. This argument seems strange, however, because on the one hand it discards Islam as irrelevant for the movement while simultaneously identifying it as the very framework through which the goal of group solidarity was achieved (Curtis 2005, 661). Moreover, this perspective relies on an almost essentialist view of religion as inflexible and dogmatic. Hence, a "proper" religion is expected to function *sui generis*, meaning that it should be performed spiritually detached from the everyday realities of the worshippers and serve only through itself. Such an idealistic concept of pure religious practice would maybe apply to a medieval monastery or Islamic *madhhab*, whereas its application seems illusionary concerning the realities of twentieth century African American urban communities.

To be sure, race politics are an important element of the NOI's teachings, a fact that has been widely criticized, most vehemently by Muslims immigrants in the U.S. For instance, the letter of an Algerian Muslim rejects the Nation's belonging to Islam and urges Americans not to "confuse the sect of Muhammad with that of *true Islam*. Islam does not preach hate […] it does not preach racism, it only calls for love, peace, and understanding" (Curtis 2006, 5; emphasis added). In fact, as immigrants began to outnumber native Black Muslims in the later twentieth century, the image of Islam in the U.S. has increasingly been dominated by the immigrant experience with its stricter adherence to the Qur'an and focus on the Middle East. The economic inequality between both groups is another issue, vesting middle class immigrants with more power to further their interpretation of Islam, raise money for communal centers and build mosques. African Americans have complained about a lack of solidarity as immigrants "will send donations to all sorts

---

[4]The title story of this issue is in fact a reprint of Elijah Muhammad's treatise "The Guilty Blue-eyed Devil" originally published in February 1972 (Muhammad 2012, 14-15, 21).

of causes in other countries forgetting to address the economic plight of their religious compatriots here in the US" (Chande 2008, 235). As a result, the cultural and theological fault lines between indigenous "Western" African American and foreign "Eastern" immigrant Muslims have contributed of the understanding of the latter as being "authentic" Muslims and the former as practicing the religion as a part of their black identity.

However, apart from the de facto impossibility of establishing what "authentic" Islam or "true" Muslim identity are, the NOI's reframing of racial issues into religious doctrines is anything but a mere strategy of political dissent. Conversely, the development of Black Muslim identity commenced as a result of dynamics among a large group of Americans who share their history as people of African descent. The available sources and themes which can be accessed to derive and shape one's identity as black American are therefore inescapably connected to the nexus of race and its histories of violence, slavery, inferiority, and social segregation. The centrality of race for the interpretation of reality in a white-dominated society as well as the production of—religious, political, social, and cultural—meaning becomes apparent in a wide array of "racialized" texts, ranging from historical slave narratives to the lyrics of present-day rap music.

The decision of members of the African American populace to see themselves as Muslims must therefore be set against the background of this shared identity. Instead of acting, like Lincoln suggested, as a veil for the NOI's black nationalist politics, Islam provides a powerful platform that is able to integrate and absorb the complexity of racial themes in its own meaningful metanarrative, namely the discourse of self-aware blackness, rooted in a black civilization created by the "original man." Through this process, the NOI has developed into what is basically an ethnicized variant of Islam ,whose teachings—like those of any other religion—are arranged around the moral, spiritual, and communal identities of its followers in whom they inspire pride, hope, and self-confidence. Allegations of its members being merely "pseudo" Muslims are thus, quite ironically, even more racially charged than the NOI's supposed racial politics because they assume a monolithic position where the "real," i.e. authoritative interpretation of the Qur'an can only be performed in particular ethnic spaces, Sunni or Shia, respectively. In fact, the assessment of the NOI's Muslim identity against some ahistorical version of normative Islam appears logical only if one takes as its basis the model of a static and unchanging world (cf. Curtis 2005, 661). But in actuality, religious practices and beliefs are performed by people based on their identities, which are subject to change. Like the identities of the people who practice them, religious communities are "dynamic, not stable; negotiated, not given" (Tweed 1997, 163). Thus, in order to call themselves Muslims, it is not necessary for NOI members to embrace dogmas like the five pillars of Islam or perform *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, like Malcolm X did after his break with Elijah Mohammad and subsequent conversion to Sunni Islam in 1964.

The NOI has succeeded in building a communal identity for its members that thrives both on the allegorical recollection of a shared history as Muslims as well as on the experience of a common present as Americans, including all of its injustices and hardships. This communal identity, however, was not primarily established as an external political counter-narrative against the dominance of white Christianity, but as an internal counter-narrative to the internalization of victimhood, inferiority, and double consciousness. Unlike political lobby groups like the NAACP, its target is the (re)construction of an empowering spiritual identity, whose religious framework it builds from patterns of references, symbols, rituals, and narratives of Black Muslim heritage. The patterns of meaning that connect blackness with Islam can be found in a wide variety of texts and activities, ranging "from poetry and plays to highly charged sports matches, from local community theaters to the boxing ring" (McAlister 1999, 624). These patterns are anchored in the cosmological teachings of Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, which form the central mythology of the NOI, and which Elijah Muhammad codified in *The Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-Called Negroes Problems* (1957) and *Message to the Blackman in America* (1965). The mythology can be described as a pseudo-scientific, race-centric narrative that emphasizes

an affirmative understanding of blackness and historicizes black identity in the context of Islamic scripture. Black Muslims believe that there is no God but Allah. This notion of God, however, diverts sharply from traditional religious understandings as it is no immaterial being but a—black—man, i.e. Fard.[5]

Sixty-six trillion years ago, the story goes, earth and moon were separated by a big explosion, which only the Asiatic Black Muslim tribe of Shabazz survived, which then settled in the Nile valley and Mecca where they created the flourishing civilization of the Original Black Nation. The story picks up about 6,600 years ago, when the evil scientist Yakub started a eugenics experiment in human hybridization on the island of Patmos. He ensured that all black babies were killed and only light-skinned children allowed to thrive in society. After six-hundred years, a race of blond, blue-eyed people was created, which caused discord among the Muslims and were thus banned to dwell in the caves of Northern Europe, where they developed into savages who plotted to subjugate the peaceful nonwhite countries (cf. Berg 2005, 692).[6] This brief outline shall suffice for the purposes of this paper, but the story is much more complex and incorporates a multitude of elements and references from both the Qur'an and the Bible. It was reinterpreted a number of times, most importantly when Abdul Farrakhan eased some of the most racist and misogynist elements in Elijah's teachings[7]

Critiques leveled at the "authenticity" of this mythology and its techniques of identity-building, as opposed to the "genuine" Islam practiced in the Middle East, Indonesia and other places, are misguided chiefly because, as Benedict Anderson explains, before anything else, communities are imagined forms of human existence and thus "are to be distinguished, not be their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991, 6). Like Abdin Chande suggests, these imagined spaces provide opportunities for African American Muslims to engage "historical Islam [and] articulate religious positions as they reflect on the needs of their communities" (2008, 221). Sociologists often view religiosity through three distinct analytical categories, also known as the "three B's," namely belonging, behavior, and belief (Keysar 2014, 1). This also affirms the importance of performativity and community-building for the NOI's Black Muslim identity. Nonetheless, as Yvonne Haddad notes, the imaginative freedom of enacting Islamic practices in order to construct a unique Black Muslim mythology, for a long time detached from influences of traditional understandings of Islam, encounters "the danger of innovation and deviance: the great range of options available in the American context carries the threat of sectarian division and fragmentation" (Haddad 1991, 4; cf. Berg 2005, 686).

Although its cosmological teachings continue to form the spiritual basis of the NOI, a strong emphasis must be put on the empowering historical and socio-cultural narratives that these teachings create for Americans of African descent who find themselves pressured by personal and structural crises. In a 2003 case study, A. A. Akom shows how the NOI's unique "black achievement ideology" enabled female high-school students to achieve above-average test results without being caught in the minority dilemma of being shunned as "acting white." Aisha, a student interviewed during this study explains this notion:

> *Before I joined [the NOI] two years ago, I used to kick it all the time and watch music videos … Now I organize meetings,*

---

[5]As Elijah Muhammad asserts, "God is a man, a flesh and blood being … a being like ourselves" (qtd. in Ansari 1981, 142).

[6]Amiri Baraka tells the story of Yakub in his play *A Black Mass*, famously recorded by Sun Ra's Myth-Science Orchestra in 1968.

[7]For instance, in an interview with *AFRICA* journal Farrakhan explains his decision to accept white people in the NOI, stating that "[t]he problem is not the White people as such, not the people you see in the flesh, but a mentality of lies, tricks, and of falsehoods" (Farrakhan 1975, 61).

> *go to study group … I don't even watch TV. … I do fund-raisin,' bake sales, and stuff … I speak Arabic … I eat right … I read more … I am more focused … I think about the world in a different way … I feel more awake … more conscious … like I'm tryin' to liberate myself and my people … I wasn't about that before.* (qtd. in Akom 2003, 312-13)

On the basis of the mythology of a knowledgable black civilization, a reframing of negative images of black identity, for instance drug and gang culture, educational failures, and parental neglect is performed. Blackness is embraced as positive and empowering "instead of associating being black with underachievement or with the social pathologies that are often ascribed to black youths and those of other minorities" (Akom 2003, 312). As a result, Islam is used as a way to alleviate real-life grievances such as unemployment, poor housing, drug abuse, and decaying moral standards (cf. Aidi 2002, 40).

Finally, compared to the Sunni and Shia traditions, the Black Muslim identity is certainly not an exegesis of Islam in any orthodox understanding. However, as has been demonstrated, the NOI's "Muslimness" becomes visible in the expression of its members' unique experience as African Americans. The identity of Black Muslims is not confined to authoritative interpretations of the Qur'an with its emphasis on the historical beginnings of Islam around 600 CE and the Middle East as the "holy land," but emerges from communal patterns of belonging and the (re)construction of a meaningful black identity instead. After all, there is not one uniform theological position among the hundreds of independent Christian churches and denominations in the United States either, whose Christianity is rarely doubted despite their high degree of diversity and contradiction. In spite of the differences between native and immigrant Muslims, there have also been positive developments. Cooperation between the groups has picked up steam, not least because of the shared experience of discrimination and FBI profiling after 9/11. Utilizing the NOI's experience with civil rights issues and financial resources of immigrant Muslims, some ties are slowly developing between the groups.

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that the emergence of African American Islam in the United States can be traced back even farther beyond the inception of the NOI in the 1930s. When Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple in 1913, he too imagined Muslim identity as a liberating experience for the "everyday-Negroes" whom he saw as the Black Asiatic descendants of the kingdom of the Moors. More recently, the American Society of Muslims, founded in 1993 by Elijah Muhammad's son Wallace, promotes more orthodox Islamic teachings while still incorporating some elements of NOI's mythology. The Nation of Islam has also spawned a number of offshoot organizations like the American Society of Muslims and Five-Percent Nation. All these groups are expressions of indigenous American Islam with their own unique histories and complex identities and thus deserve more scholarly attention than can be given in this paper. At the present time, as resentments against Islam and allegations of its extraneousness to the Christian American identity have arrived in mainstream politics, this seems more important than ever. By definition, Muslim means "one who surrenders and submits to the laws of God." If this means submitting under Allah in order to escape from the ongoing history of subjugation in a white Christian society, the NOI must surely be seen as a part of Islam, which in turn must be seen as part of the American religious landscape and no longer ignored in arguments about Islam as being foreign to the United States.

Bibliography

Aidi, Hisham. "Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror." *Middle East Report*, no. 224 (Autumn 2002): 36-43. Accessed December 18, 2015.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

Ansari, Zafar Ishaq. "Aspects of Black Muslim Theology." *Studia Islamica*, no. 53 (1981): 137-76.

Berg, Herbert. "Mythmaking in the African American Muslim Context: The Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (September 2005): 685-703. Accessed November 14, 2015.

Chande, Abdin. "Islam in the African American Community: Negotiating between Black Nationalism and Historical Islam." *Islamic Studies* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 221-41. Accessed November 14, 2015.

Curtis, Edward E. "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (September 2005): 659-84. Accessed November 14, 2015.

– – –. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

– – –. *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Farrakhan, Abdul. Interview by Howard Lee. *Africa Overseas*, October 1975.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. Introduction. In *The Muslims of America*, edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 1-8. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Keysar, Ariela. "Shifts Along the American Religious-Secular Spectrum." *Secularism and Nonreligion* 3 (2014): 1-16. Accessed December 8, 2015.

Lincoln, C. Eric. *The Black Muslims in America*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Martin, Richard C. *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*. New York: Macmillan, 2004.

McAlister, Melani. "One Black Allah: The Middle East in the Cultural Politics of African American Liberation, 1955-1970." *American Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (September 1999): 622-56. Accessed November 14, 2015.

Muhammad, Ashahed M. "The Final Call." Nation of Islam Auditors Graduation Held for Third Saviours' Day in a Row. February 28, 2013. Accessed December 27, 2015. http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/National_News_2/article_9651.shtml.

– – –, Elijah. "The Guilty Blue-eyed Devil." *Muhammad Speaks*, May 2012.

– – –. *Yakub (Jacob): The Father of Mankind*. Atlanta: Secretarius Publications, 2002.

PewResearchCenter. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." PewResearchCenter. May 11, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2015. http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

Saul, Heather. "Malala Condemns Donald Trump's 'tragic' Call to Ban Muslims in US: 'It Will Radicalise More Terrorists'" The Independent. December 17, 2015. Accessed December 21, 2015. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/malala-warns-donald-trump-his-call-to-ban-muslims-in-us-will-radicalise-more-terrorists-a6774996.html.

Tweed, Thomas A. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Woodard, Komozi. *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.