Mythmaking in the African American Muslim Context: The Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims

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Two of the earliest African American Muslim movements, the Moorish Science Temple founded by Noble Drew Ali and the Nation of Islam founded by Wali Fard Muhammad and developed by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, taught that Islam was the original and inherent religion of African Americans. Each reenvisioned the origins of the races and of Islam. Drew Ali viewed African Americans as Black Asiatics and descendants of the kingdom of Moors. Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad saw African Americans as the descendants of the original Black humanity, who later produced the "wicked white race." More recently, Warith Deen Mohammed, leader of the American Society of Muslims, has suggested that the mythology developed by his father, Elijah Muhammad, was part of some grand scheme to bring African Americans to orthodox Islam. These reinterpretations of the history are best seen as a product of the interrelated activities of social formation and mythmaking.

MUSLIMS LIVING IN North America have had the unique opportunity to define and redefine Islam for almost a century without significant interference or opposition from Muslims with more traditional

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understandings of Islam. Many of these Muslims have seized this freedom to experiment with novel conceptions and formulations of Islam, but as Yvonne Haddad points out, "this freedom is fraught with the danger of innovation and deviance: the great range of options available in the American context carries the threat of sectarian division and fragmentation" (4). Nowhere is this experimentation and deviation more apparent than in the development of uniquely North American forms of Islam, namely, the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims.

Many Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves were Muslims. However, with some very notable exceptions (Austin; Turner: 1–67), it was not long before no significant vestiges of Islam remained among most African American slaves. The two first American Muslim movements, the Moorish Science Temple founded by Noble Drew Ali and the Nation of Islam founded by Wali Fard Muhammad and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, sought to reclaim a perceived Islamic heritage for African Americans. Drew Ali viewed African Americans as Asiatics and descendants of the Islamic Moorish Empire. Their origin was placed outside Africa, and the religion of Islam was recast such that only a few keywords and practices were recognizably "Islamic." Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad saw African Americans as the descendants of an original Black humanity, who had relatively recently produced the wicked white race. Although their version of Islam is certainly more recognizable than Ali's as related to "orthodox" Islam, their emphasis on race (particularly in the United States) and doctrines of the incarnation of Allah in Fard Muhammad, the prophethood of Elijah Muhammad, the denial of the resurrection, and the denigration of Christianity are very atypical. When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975 and his son Warith Deen Mohammed took over the Nation of Islam, he rapidly reshaped the movement, which he renamed several times but is now called the American Society of Muslims, to conform to Sunni Islam. However, he still needed to deal with his father's legacy and so has begun the process of mythic revision.

MYTHS AND MYTHMAKING

Although anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, mythologists, and scholars of religions have produced many definitions for the word "myth," most of them can be categorized in one of the two ways. Those in the first category are similar to the popular usage of the word "myth": a false or implausible (and usually someone else's) belief or tale. Within this category fall those definitions that view myths as a product of

euhemerism or "ancient savage philosophers" trying to explain mysterious phenomena. In either case, the myths are false, though still interesting objects of study for the insights they provide into the minds of our ancestors. Certainly there are euhemeristic qualities to the status accorded to Drew Ali, Fard Muhammad, and perhaps even Elijah Muhammad by their respective movements. However, such an approach to the movements' myths would prove pointless. Although people outside the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims are unlikely to view their myths as anything but false, such an approach would bring us no closer to determining the reasons for the creation, appeal, and endurance of these myths among the members of these movements.

The second category of definitions for myth is that which tends to view myths as "true" in some sense. Of course there are many ways for something to be true. A myth might be true in that it expresses something that is psychically real. For Sigmund Freud myths are the social equivalent of dreams—both a product of repression. And, as the product of repressed drives for the sake of a harmonious civilization, myths could be seen as both true and false: they express a truth, but a truth that is not what it seems. (A similar claim might be made about Emile Durkheim, who would see myth as a true expression of group cohesiveness, but again a truth that is not what it seems.) For Carl Jung myths also symbolically express a deep psychic reality. They are culturally determined manifestations of the universal archetypes that abide within the collective unconsciousness. Therefore, myths are true in the most crucial sense, albeit not in a literal sense. Yet for some others myths are products of a different mentality, one that is non-rational or beyond the rational (i.e., mystical or emotional in nature). Once again we have a different kind of "true." Closely related to Jung's and mythopoeic definitions are those that suggest myths are symbolically imbued with something that ultimately cannot be reduced or rationalized away. That is to say, myths express primordial truths or the "sacred." Hence they are true by definition. Although disguised in various forms, this kind of definition is espoused by Mircea Eliade, Wendy Doniger-O'Flaherty, and Kees W. Bolle, to name only a few.

Accepting the myths of the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and even the American Society of Muslims as true, in whatever sense, seems even more problematic than dismissing them as false. That these myths were produced by individuals as opposed to groups is difficult to reconcile with some of the truth-definitions of myth, especially when much of Drew Ali's Koran is plagiarized from other sources (see below) and the eclectic themes of Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad's

myths seem to be borrowed from various sources (Clegg: 69–73). All three movements suffer from having been born less than a century ago. We know *how* the myths came to be. Furthermore given the racial claims made by the Moorish Science Temple and particularly the Nation of Islam, even the most open-minded and sanguine scholar might balk at seeing primordial truths or the sacred encapsulated within their myths. New myths are not as easily romanticized as their ancient cousins.

A third and more fruitful approach, I suggest, would be to examine the myths of these African American movements from a perspective that dismisses myths neither as impotent and largely irrelevant falsehoods nor as powerful and profound truths, but rather as the product of a surprisingly ordinary human activity. Russell McCutcheon redescribes the category of "myth" by suggesting "(1) that myths are not special (or 'sacred') but ordinary human means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and believed-in 'worlds,' (2) that myth as an ordinary rhetorical device in social construction and maintenance makes *this* rather than *that* social identity possible in the first place and (3) that a people's use of the *label* 'myth' reflects, expresses, explores and legitimizes their own self-image" (200). The key words within his redescription are "ordinary," "identity," and "authorizing" (or, "construction," "maintenance," and "legitimizing"). The term "ordinary" suggests that we are not dealing with some human activity that is beyond our ken. It is not extraordinary, unique, unknowable, or, in a word, "sacred." Nor, I should hasten to add, does that make myths irrelevant; they deal with the critical human issue of self-identity. These rhetorical acts that construct and maintain identity are called mythmaking. Simply put, mythmaking is a social activity in which the group authorizes its identity and the role it sees for itself in the larger scheme of things (Mack 1995: 11). It is one of the key ways in which a group forms and perpetuates itself. Consequently myths have no inherent power or truth other than that bestowed upon them by the group that identifies itself through those myths.

One might well ask at this point, what distinguishes mythmaking from other rhetorical acts of constructing and maintaining group identities? In a word, "nothing." More elaborately stated, mythmaking can describe any rhetorical act whose goal is to create, renew, sustain, or radically reenvision a group identity—whether within a street gang, a nation, a religious community, or in this case a people identified by the color of their skin. What distinguishes "religious" mythmaking from "other" rhetorical acts (that some scholars might balk at calling "mythmaking") is the tendency of the former type of acts "to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal" (Lincoln 1996: 225). The real question becomes whether this

particular feature is sufficiently unique as to demand that a distinction in terminology be made between rhetorical acts that have this feature and those that do not (but otherwise are similar in methods and outcomes). I think not. Nevertheless, mythmaking as practiced by Drew Ali and especially Elijah Muhammad has this feature, and its presence explains the key, though odd, role Islam plays within their mythmaking.

This article argues that the new and relatively recently created myths of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam were not based on any historical recollection but are best seen as a product of the interrelated activities of mythmaking and social formation. Although the myths seem strange and incredible, these mythic ideas need to be viewed as plausible and appropriate to the self-understanding of each group (Mack 1995: 71). In other words, they are revising the past, "in light of present circumstances from a particular point of view to support a critical judgment about the present state of affairs" (Mack 1995: 36). Despite the wholesale adoption of Sunni Islam and its myths, this process continues with Warith Deen Mohammed as he deals with the legacy he inherited from his father and the Nation of Islam.

NOBLE DREW ALI AND THE MOORISH SCIENCE TEMPLE

Timothy Drew was born in 1886 in North Carolina to ex-slaves living among Cherokee Indians. Beyond these facts, we know very little of his life, for much of the traditional biography is inconsistent hagiography. It is said that his mother foresaw great things in him, but when she died, Drew was raised by an aunt who abused him until he ran away. While living with gypsies, he heard a voice say to him, "If you go, I will follow." So he left, and though there are various versions of this tale, he became a merchant seaman at the age of sixteen and eventually came to Egypt. There he is said to have passed some sort of test in the Pyramid of Cheops and so became Noble Drew Ali. Then, with his *Circle Seven Koran*, he became a prophet. In 1912 or 1913, in response to a dream that told him to find a religion "for the uplifting of fallen mankind," especially the "lost-found nation of American blacks," he created the first Moorish Science Temple (originally, "The Canaanite Temple") in Newark, New Jersey (Wilson: 15–16).

According to Drew Ali, African Americans are "Asiatics" and Moors. Their ancestors were the Canaanites who descended from Noah's son Ham. They are also descendants of the biblical Moabites. Their more recent ancestors inhabited West Africa where they established the Moorish

empire that ruled most of Europe and Asia.[1] The blacks of America are therefore actually Moors, and their natural religion is Islam, not Christianity. Though Jesus was also a Canaanite, he was merely a prophet. The Romans killed him and then founded Christianity. "Only by means of a deliberate distortion of the racial background of Jesus was it possible for European (whites) to claim him as one of their own and establish him as the head of their church" (Fauset: 72).

The American portion of this myth begins in 1682 when, according to Noble Drew Ali, the "Black Laws of Virginia" exempted Moors (i.e., Moroccan nationals) from slavery. However, in 1774 the founding fathers declared only "Negroes" subject to slavery. Legally Moors could not be slaves. And George Washington, who was a slave owner, was aware of this, and he cut down the red banner of the Moors so as to hide this fact. (This event, incidentally, was said to have given rise to the "cherry-tree" legend.) For their part the Moors had forgotten their true identity as Moors and accepted the label of "Negro" and, as a result, the condition of slavery. If they had "honored their mother and father" and not "strayed after the strange gods of Europe," they would not have suffered slavery (Wilson: 16–19).

This myth is not particularly complex, but it has some interesting features. First, what, if anything, makes this myth Islamic is difficult to discern. The religion from which the Moors turned away was Islam, but the Islamic terminology is limited, and there is clearly no effort to revise or incorporate the Islamic mythology or its individual myths. This tendency is also evident in the scripture, the *Circle Seven Koran*, which has a large section devoted to Jesus, but the material is entirely apocryphal.[2] Muhammad is mentioned only twice and, very cursorily, once as "the founder of uniting of Islam" and once as the one who "fulfilled the works of Jesus of Nazareth" (Ali: 57). The Christian mythology is therefore also largely ignored. The reference to Ham, though biblical, takes the Moorish Science Temple away from the core of Jewish mythology. The figure of Ham, who was cursed by his father, had been cited as biblical justification for slavery by some white Christians. Drew Ali seems to have accepted the genealogical claim being made but reinterpreted it to show that Moors have an ancient and noble past.

[1] Oddly Ireland was considered one of its last strongholds, and so Celts were considered Asiatics and eligible for membership in the Moorish Science Temple.

[2] Much of the account of Jesus is taken from H. Dowling's *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, which recounts Jesus' life between his adolescence and the beginning of his public ministry.

Similarly, the purpose of the mythical Moorish empire is clearly to connect African Americans with a proud heritage, thereby circumventing the then generally accepted picture of Africa, its inhabitants, and their American cousins as savage and uncivilized. The plausibility of both of these claims (i.e., those of white racists about Africa and those of Drew Ali about the Moorish empire) was no doubt enhanced by the ignorance of Africa and its history. However, the myth of the Canaanites and the Moorish empire itself was necessary, if the Moorish demand for a return to Islam was to be accepted and compete for the hearts and minds of the overwhelmingly Christian African Americans. To that end Drew Ali also stressed that each race had its own religion. Europeans had Christianity; the Moors had Islam. Love would replace hate only when everyone "worship[s] under his own vine and fig tree" (Fauset: 47).

As for the portion of the myth that deals with slavery in America, Drew Ali does not dwell on the wrongness of slavery or the evilness of Europeans for enslaving Asiatics but emphasizes that Moors should never have been enslaved. It was illegal; but "illegal" is not the same thing as "evil." Moreover, the fault does not lie exclusively with white Americans. Moors forgot who they were (though the founding fathers and other whites certainly had a hand in causing them to forget). Had they remembered such things would never have occurred. Thus, the story serves as both a theodicy and a paradigm for their identity. It explains why slavery occurred and what must be done now. African Americans are being called to a spiritual return to their roots, which will guarantee them "love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice." For, by taking the Moorish name away and calling them Negroes, blacks, colored, and so forth, "the European stripped the Moor of his power, his authority, his God, and every other worthwhile possession" (Fauset: 47).

WALI FARD MUHAMMAD, ELIJAH MUHAMMAD, AND THE NATION OF ISLAM

The life of the founder of the Nation of Islam, Wali Fard Muhammad, is even more unknown and rife with contradiction than that of Noble Drew Ali. His successor and the main architect of the movement, Elijah Muhammad, taught that Fard Muhammad was born to the tribe of Quraysh in Mecca in 1877. He came to Detroit in 1931 after a brief stop in Chicago, where according to scholars he may have had contact with Ahmadiyyas, Moorish Americans, and Garveyites (Clegg: 21). Fard Muhammad taught Detroit's African Americans that the so-called Negroes were members of the lost tribe of Shabazz from Mecca. He had come to resurrect this Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America. The Blackman

must return to his original religion, Islam, his original language, Arabic, and the law of Allah. And although Fard Muhammad spoke of himself as a prophet, at least some of his followers, including Elijah Muhammad, thought of him as Allah incarnate. By the time of his disappearance in 1934 Fard Muhammad had laid the foundation for the myth of the Nation of Islam. However, this myth comes to us almost solely through his messenger Elijah Muhammad, who struggled for control of the Nation of Islam in the 1930s and struggled with obscurity and prison in the 1940s. He then witnessed the movement's meteoric rise to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. Only in the late 1950s did Elijah Muhammad begin to publish his teachings in radio addresses, newspaper columns, pamphlets, and eventually books. Therefore, our main sources for mythmaking in the Nation of Islam come after two decades of development.

According to Elijah Muhammad, the black race is as old as the planet. However, the story begins 66 trillion years ago when God, failing to unite the people in one language as he wanted, decided to destroy the planet by blasting it in two. The Asiatic[3] black tribe of Shabazz survived the division of the planet into earth and moon and settled in the Nile valley and Mecca (Muhammad 1992: 31–32). The story resumes just over 6,600 years ago when the evil genius Yakub was born. Though of the Black Nation himself, Yakub began converting people by teaching Islam and promising luxuries. He had discovered the secrets of selective breeding and needed people for his eugenics program. His success eventually caused enough concern in Mecca that Yakub and his 59,999 followers parted company with the remainder of the Black Nation. On an island in the Aegean Sea Yakub set up a 600-year program to breed an increasingly whiter and more evil people. After the 600 years the newly created whites returned to Mecca and soon managed to turn the Black Nation against itself. As a result the whites were driven at gunpoint to Europe. Moses was sent by Allah 2,000 years later to try to civilize these hairy, naked, cave-dwelling, tree-climbing savages. Jesus and Muhammad also tried to convert these white devils. They failed, for it had been prophesied that the white race would rule the world for 6,000 years and enslave black people in the Americas until the coming of Wali Fard Muhammad to mentally resurrect the Lost-Found Nation of Islam (Muhammad 1992: 112–121). These events and prophecies are recorded in the Bible according to Elijah Muhammad. For instance, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis is the story of the creation of the white race, and the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation is the prophecy written by Yakub against the white race he

[3] Africa is, for Elijah Muhammad, "East Asia."

created. However, because the Bible is a "poison book," its truths can only be understood when properly interpreted by Allah's messenger.

The preceding race myth is the backdrop for Elijah Muhammad's understanding of Islam and the history of African Americans. Elijah Muhammad marked the 400-year period from 1555 to 1955 as particularly significant. He stated that Allah taught that the ancestors of African Americans were deceived and brought to America in 1555 by a slave trader named John Hawkins in a slave ship called "Jesus" (1957: 15). Elijah Muhammad wrote,

> In 300 years of slavery, we were lashed, beaten and killed; given no education; and reared and cared for like the slave-master's stock (horses, cows and other domestic animals). Our children were separated to different plantation owners. For the last approximately 100 years of so-called freedom, the so-called Negroes have been subjected to the worst inhuman treatment for any people who have ever lived on earth. They (the devils) have lynched and burned the so-called Negroes during the past century as sport for their wives and children to enjoy! (1992: 230)

However, Fard Muhammad, Allah himself, came to "cut loose every link of the slave chain that holds us in bondage to our slave-masters by giving us a true knowledge of self, God and the devil and wipe away the 400 years of tears, weeping, mourning and groaning under the yoke of bondage to the merciless murders" (Muhammad 1957: 17). This prophesied 400 years came to an end in 1955 (Muhammad 1992: 38)—the significance of that date is unclear, since the end of the 6,000-year rule of whites was said to have occurred in 1914.[4]

The mention of Mecca, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad may seem to be mere superficial references to traditional Islam. However, Islam (if not its Arabian mythology) plays a central role in this race myth. It is the natural religion of the blackman, it is the religion of the prophets, and it is as old as Allah and the universe (Muhammad 1992: 68, 80).[5] More importantly, it stands in opposition to Christianity, which "is one of the most perfect black-slave-making religions on our planet. It has completely killed the so-called Negroes mentally" (Muhammad 1992: 70). By that Elijah Muhammad means it teaches blacks to worship a false white,

[4] Again, the significance of that year is unclear. And Elijah Muhammad writes of an extension being granted by Allah, depending how the "righteous" were treated. He then adds that there can be no judgment until the "so-called Negroes hear Islam" (1992: 18).

[5] However, there are times when Elijah Muhammad refers to Islam as the last of the three (the others being Christianity and Buddhism) (1992: 70).

blonde, blue-eyed God. In effect it teaches them to worship whites. It also tells them to turn the other cheek when they are abused and to wait until the next life for justice. For him Christianity was created by the white devils in their wickedness, while Islam comes from Allah. The two religions have battled in the past: Christianity was "bottled up" in Europe for nearly 1,000 years by the coming of Muḥammad and the subsequent spread of Islam, though from 1555 to 1955 whites were free to roam the world and deceive its inhabitants (Muhammad 1992: 3). And they will battle again: with Allah's return, the war of Armageddon will be a religious war between Islam and Christianity.

The appeal of the race myth is obvious. A history that reversed the traditional account of the European and African contributions to civilization was a source of pride, inspiration, and revolutionary ideas to African Americans.[6] It would certainly appeal to people who saw the racist behavior of whites as uncivilized. Moreover, the myth in positing an ancient golden age of black civilization not only appeals to the pride of African Americans but also dismisses all of the intervening and recent history as a departure from that ideal. The message is clear: to return to the greatness of old, one must return to the Nation of Islam. This is a common strategy in mythmaking: to seek or create a pristine moment in the past and bracket out the intervening and recent history as a failure to maintain that purity (Mack 1995: 118).

As we saw, Drew Ali did not really claim or even revise the Islamic, Christian, or Jewish mythologies. Jesus and Muḥammad were considered prophets, but so too were the Buddha and Confucius. It is tempting, however, to see much of Elijah Muhammad's mythmaking as "epic revision" (Mack 1988: 71). That is, at first glance it seems that he simply aligned the Nation of Islam with a slightly revised, more ancient, "black" Islam. Likewise, Jewish and Christian mythologies may seem reinterpreted in light of the antebellum and postbellum circumstances of African Americans. Most of his writings, after all, are laced with passages from the Bible—more than double the number from the Qur'ān. But on closer inspection, it is clear that Elijah Muhammad built upon Fard Muhammad's race myth, which owes little to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. The story of the tribe of Shabazz, of Yakub and his white race, and of the enslavement in the Americas could be told without reference to the Bible or the

[6] A good example of this is the white racist claim that it is "obvious" that Africans are more closely related to other primates from which humans evolved. Elijah Muhammad reverses this by stating that Allah taught him that some whites tried to "graft themselves back into the black nation." They only got as far as turning themselves into gorillas. "In fact, all the monkey family are from this 2,000 year history of the white race in Europe" (1992: 119).

Qur'ān. What Elijah Muhammad does is reinterpret individual biblical and quranic passages (and sometimes myths) to fit, substantiate, and elaborate the myth. This is particularly evident in the depictions of Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, whose traditional biographies are ignored and for whom new roles are created within the race myth.

A short example will help illustrate his method. Genesis 1:16 reads, "Let us make man in our image." For Elijah Muhammad the "us" refers to the 59,999 followers of Yakub who created the white race in their image (1992: 119). Adam represents the white race, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is Yakub, the tree of life is the Nation of Islam (i.e., the black Muslim people), and the expulsion from the Garden is the exile to Europe (1992: 133). However, much of Elijah Muhammad's exegesis of biblical passages was ad hoc, experimental, and tentative. Using the Adam and Eve story as an example again, we see that Elijah Muhammad elsewhere identifies the white race not only with Adam but also with the serpent and the tree of knowledge (1992: 126–127). Moreover, the term "devil" can refer to Adam and Eve, the serpent, the tree, Yakub, and/or the white race. Nevertheless, his mythmaking shows a great deal of ingenuity, if not consistency. He was able to dismiss Christianity, the religion from whom his converts came, not as unnatural for African Americans (as Drew Ali had done) but as evil. Yet, at the same time, he could continue to appeal to the one scripture with which African Americans were familiar—the Bible—and in a way that left them utterly dependent on him for its interpretation.

WARITH DEEN MOHAMMED AND THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF MUSLIMS

When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, his son Wallace D. Muhammad, now known as Warith Deen Mohammed, succeeded him. Although his father had reprimanded him several times in the late 1960s and early 1970s for his unorthodox beliefs (i.e., "unorthodox" from the point of view of the Nation of Islam), his father still appointed him as his successor.

As its new leader, Warith Deen Mohammed rapidly reformed the Nation of Islam. The racial superiority doctrine, the demand for a separate state for African Americans, and anti-American and anti-Christian slogans were dropped. The nationality was changed from the tribe of Shabazz to Bilalians.[7]

[7] Bilāl was an early African convert to Islam. He was a slave in Mecca, and though Muḥammad's opponents could not directly physically persecute him, Bilāl, as a slave, was attacked. Later, he became the first muezzin, the one who called people to prayer.

Despite this wholesale adoption of the traditional Sunni Islamic mythology, Warith Deen Mohammed has continued mythmaking. His mythmaking is epic revision (Mack 1988: 71), namely, the "epic" of Wali Fard Muhammad. Having denied that Fard was Allah incarnate, Mohammed in an interview in 1979 spoke of Fard as merely a wise man, and his father, Elijah Muhammad, as only chief minister of Islam (Marsh: 93). Followers of Warith Deen Mohammed, however, labeled Fard a "witchdoctor" (Sharif: 95), a "pretender," "a conspirator," and even "a friend and a close associate of the Devil himself," who taught a "mixture of Al-Islam, witchcraft and Christianity" (Sharif: 71–72). However, most recently, Warith Deen Mohammed identifies Fard as coming from the region of what is now Pakistan and sympathizing with the plight of African Americans. Also described as a "special person," "great mind," or "brilliant mind," who "created a myth and language environment that would attract and hold African Americans who were dissatisfied with their life in America and had no faith in their future" (Mohammed). Fard hoped thereby to create a "new people" who would "think bigger." To that end he created a myth that exaggerated the abilities of African Americans: once "they were the superiors, the masters of the world." Fard, Warith Deen argues, was not interested in the myth except insofar as it allowed African Americans to develop independent minds. However, "his greatest desire was that we would one day become our own Muslims."

Here then is the key revision. Fard is being portrayed as someone whose true but secret purpose was to bring African Americans to "orthodox Islam" (i.e., orthodox as understood by Warith Deen Mohammed). "He wanted that we study the Qur'ān," but told his follower, Elijah Muhammad, not to teach the Qur'ān. "When the time comes, your children will learn the Qur'ān, and they will teach you." Thus, Fard had "created this thing as a strategy, a temporary strategy, a temporary language environment, to hold uneducated Blacks . . . long enough to come into an independent mind . . . and then later study the Qur'an" (Mohammed). In fact, according to Warith Deen, Fard knew things would get better in America for African Americans. Eventually, as they became more educated, they would question the very racial myth Fard had created. They would discover that even Fard himself had ridiculed it.[8] He told Elijah Muhammad that "there is coming another Islam. You will get another holy Qur'ān" (Mohammed). When Fard gave Elijah Muhammad an Arabic book, it appears that the latter took it to be that new Qur'an. For

[8] For instance, Fard taught that whites were evil, but it was a black man, Mr. Yakub, who had created them. Also, God himself (i.e., Fard) was the son of a black man and a white woman.

years he kept it wrapped in its green cover, mounted in a place of honor. Later when his sons Akbar and Warith Deen had studied Arabic, he allowed them to read it. They discovered that it was the same Qur'ān used by other Muslims. For Warith Deen this is a clear indication that Fard had intended to move to Islamic orthodoxy. It had always been his plan: his followers would "choose the Islam that is in the Qur'ān." His purpose was to establish true Islam, but he had to establish independent thinking first.

FORGING NEW IDENTITIES

At first sight the myths or salvation histories of the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims may seem to be mere products of the overactive imaginations of Drew Ali, Fard Muhammad, and Elijah Muhammad, and wishful thinking by Warith Deen Mohammed. However, mythmaking is most frequently an organic activity that explains how a group sees itself and its place within the world; by its very nature mythmaking is not systematic but experimental. The key element in the myths created by these men was the myths' ability to present an identity that was appropriate for the circumstances of the group and so made sense and appealed to the members of that group. Otherwise, these myths would not have been understood, believed, and propagated.

A brief look at some of the more salient aspects of the Moorish Science Temple's and Nation of Islam's myths illustrates some of myths' appropriateness for African Americans. Noble Drew Ali drew on the Garveyite movement. Not only was Marcus Garvey's relationship to Drew Ali likened in the *Circle Seven Koran* to that of John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus, but the acceptability of a demand to return to Africa, spiritually and mentally in the case of Drew Ali, is deeply indebted to Garvey. Drew Ali simply found an eminently more feasible way to return to the homeland. The use of Islamic terminology and imagery was also made possible by (1) the aforementioned vestiges of Islam among African Americans, (2) the association of Islam as the enemy of Christendom (read: Europe), and (3) just as important, general ignorance of Islam.

Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad are indebted not only to these same factors, but also to Drew Ali himself. They took the race consciousness of Drew Ali to the next level, race supremacy, and transformed the return to the homeland to a demand for the separation of blacks and whites and a separate nation within the continental United States. The appeal of this greater militancy was no doubt spurred on by

the continued disparities between whites and blacks despite the economic growth after World War II. The role of Islam in this was still somewhat limited. Although the practices and scripture of the Nation of Islam were far more Islamic than those of the Moorish Science Temple, its myth was not. (See below for a fuller discussion of the role of Islam in the mythmaking of the Nation of Islam.) Rather, it spoke directly to the racial problems faced by African Americans. It provided a past that reversed white supremacist myths, thereby declaring that the appalling situation was not how it was in the distant past or should be in the present or would be in the future. It was a theodicy that said that such things were prophesied to end, thereby declaring that change was not only possible but inevitable—if only African Americans would adopt the right identity.[9]

As for Warith Deen Mohammed, he has found a way to incorporate the Nation of Islam's mythology but at the same time to reject it. That is to say, the move to orthodoxy was not only acceptable but also intended and prophesied by Fard himself. What Mohammed's motivation is for reenvisioning Fard is not entirely certain. However, several possibilities exist. First, denigrating Fard might undermine Mohammed's own mystique. He was Elijah Muhammad's seventh son, the only one born during the time of Fard, predicted by Fard, and named after Fard. This mystique was a least partially responsible for his acclamation as leader after his father's death, despite his having been excommunicated several times by his father (Marsh: 92). Second, Mohammed has been extending the olive branch to Louis Farrakhan, the man who so disagreed with Mohammed's reforms the he "resurrected" the Nation of Islam and has led it for over two decades. Farrakhan and his followers still adhere to the original teachings of the Nation of Islam regarding Fard and Elijah Muhammad. Warith Deen Mohammed may simply be showing greater respect for their shared heritage to bring the two groups closer. And third, many members of Mohammed's organization came to Islam via the Nation of Islam. For many years Fard was their Allah and Elijah Mohammed was his messenger.[10] The myth as told by Mohammed makes it possible to understand their earlier "unislamic" beliefs as a prerequisite stage. It reflects their own journey, validating who they were and who they are.

[9] The importance of identity is also explicitly stated by Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad. The former's slogans on his Koran's inside cover and back read, "Know Thyself and Allah" and "Know Yourself and Your Father God-Allah" (Ali). The latter repeats the statement "Be yourself!" and emphasizes "knowledge of self" (Muhammad 1957: 12, 18–19).

[10] Even younger members of this African American Muslim organization may see no benefit in denigrating early African Americans leaders who fought for their human and civil rights.

It seems therefore that African American Muslims' mythmaking was not simply a matter of arranging or rearranging ideas to produce a particular image, story, or set of symbols. Despite the apparently conscious production of these myths by these individuals, it is clear that social circumstances and the appeal of new and noble identities motivated the adoption of these myths.

ISLAM AND EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN ISLAM

A striking feature of the mythmaking within both the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam is their claim to Islam. This raises two important questions: how "Islamic" were these claims and, far more importantly, why were the claims made?

The first question is the more difficult to answer. Obviously, there is no monolithic Islam, except perhaps in the minds of Muslims with *salafiyyah* inclinations (i.e., so-called "fundamentalist Muslims") and in the minds of scholars with orientalist inclinations. It would be overly pedantic to catalog the great diversity of beliefs and practices claimed to be Islamic by people calling themselves Muslim. Suffice it to say, that one should speak of "Islams" rather than "Islam" (in the same way Jacob Neusner speaks of "Judaisms").

Nevertheless, many Muslims have objected to many prominent features of the Moorish Science Temple's and Nation of Islam's mythmaking: Drew Ali's production of a text referred to as the "Koran," his claim to prophethood, and his focus on race; and Elijah Muhammad's assertions that Fard Muhammad was Allah incarnate, that he himself was his messenger, that heaven and hell are here on earth, that the white man is the devil. If one had to generalize about Islam, belief in Allah, angels, prophets, scriptures, and judgment day (i.e., the five principles of Islam) would be a likely place to start. Obviously, Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad are at variance with several of these principles as normally defined. Many Muslims outside these movements have and continue to vehemently object to the use of the words "Islam" and "Muslim" by these movements, especially the Nation of Islam (e.g., El-Amin: 1–40). And, when push came to shove between the Nation of Islam and other Muslims by the late 1960s, Elijah Muhammad dismissed them, accusing them of having been deceived, and declared "The Old Islam was led by white people, white Muslims, but this one will not be. This Islam will be established and led by Black Muslims only" (1972: 1).

Even so, the issue of whether the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam are "Islamic" is not, nor should it be, a major concern—at least to the scholar. The scholar is not an inquisitor searching out

heresy. As I have argued elsewhere, Elijah Muhammad could even been seen as a *mufassir*, a quranic exegete (Berg: 320–346). There is no shortage of Muslims who have had beliefs and practices that were considered heretical by others and who brought their own background, culture, or agenda to their understanding of Islam. What we see here is a struggle over who controls the "copyright" over Islamic figures, texts, and terminology. But that is precisely why the issues raised by the first question have some bearing on the subject of this article: creating boundaries is part of mythmaking insofar as it has to do with the construction and maintenance of an identity.

The second question is the more interesting question. It seems odd that Islam should be invoked at all by the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam, given the superficial relationship to other Islams (such as the various forms of Sunnism, Shi'ism, and Sufism). One could argue that the freedom to experiment and deviate has produced myths and organizations that are almost entirely the product of the environment in North America. That is, they are far more American than they are Islamic. For instance, C. Eric Lincoln argued that the Nation of Islam only required the façade of Islam:

> [T]he aegis of orthodox Islam means little in America's black ghettos. So long as the movement keeps its color identity with the rising black peoples of Africa, it could discard all its Islamic attributes—its name, its prayers to Allah, its citations from the Quran, everything "Muslim," without substantial risk to its appeal to the black masses. (210)

In other words, the appeal to Islamic figures, language, scripture, and so forth in the mythmaking of Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad was at best superficial and incidental.

Lincoln's thesis seems an oversimplification. Clearly Elijah Muhammad did not feel the need to seek the approval of Muslims outside his movement. And, when he came under attack from other Muslims, he did not abandon Islam; he abandoned those Muslims (as "white Muslims"). However, "Islam" was much more than a façade; it was integral to his mythmaking. Elijah Muhammad merely focused most intensely on those features of Islam that were relevant to African Americans—that is, those that dealt with "color identity." The perceived connections of Islam with Africa, the centuries of confrontation of the "Muslim world" with Christendom, the glory of earlier Islamic civilizations, the assumed lack of "slave teachings" in Islam, and the antipathy of white Americans toward Islam were critical to the identity that Elijah Muhammad was trying to forge in the members of his movement. Some "religious" aspects of Islam

were important too: rituals such as prayer, for instance, fostered social cohesion and gave tangible expressions to new identities. (Myths need rituals; rituals need myths.) But the aforementioned ideological aspects of Islam were the most crucial. The "color identity" that Eric Lincoln thinks is the essence of the Nation of Islam is inextricably intertwined with Elijah Muhammad's unique understanding of Islam. Perhaps even more importantly, Elijah Muhammad's own authority was founded entirely upon his unique prophetic access to "the eternal and transcendent authority" of Wali Fard Muhammad (i.e., Allah incarnate). Therefore, this key feature of his mythmaking required the religious credibility that the aegis of Islam provided for that claim. Islam as a "religion," if not its practices and beliefs, was indispensable. Moreover, it is precisely the "Islamic" claims (even if seemingly heterodox) of Elijah Muhammad (and even Drew Ali) that make their mythmaking a "religious" activity.

CONCLUSIONS

Mythmaking and social formation are mutually reinforcing activities that accelerate sped up in times of social disintegration and cultural change (Mack 1995: 11). It is perhaps no surprise then that both Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad were both from the South, whose adherents like themselves had recently moved to the North. Because of their experiences in the South, the willingness to move in search of a better life, and their disappointment in the North, these people were undoubtedly the most race conscious, the most courageous, and the most disillusioned. To belong to a group whose myth challenged traditional white characterizations of African Americans and proposed a radical alternative that promised to end or even reverse current injustices would have been very attractive indeed. Moreover, these myths explained the differences between their actual social circumstances and the situation they would have liked to imagine for themselves in the greater scheme of things (Mack 1995: 176). Warith Deen Mohammed's followers are in a much less precarious socioeconomic position, but in merging with mainstream American society and more traditional Islamic beliefs and practices, their unique identity has become uncomfortably fluid. Again, a myth that makes this fluidity their destiny would also be very appealing.

In each case, the mythmaking expanded "the horizons of time and space beyond the limits of the perceived world within which a people actually live, [while at the same time they corresponded] to the practices and structures of determination in a society, lending legitimacy to certain configurations of power and fostering their reproduction" (Mack 2000: 291). Because the emergence of African American Islams is so close and

so recent, they provide a unique opportunity to see the processes of mythmaking and social formation.

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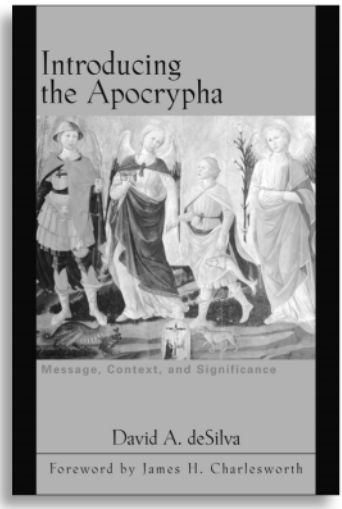

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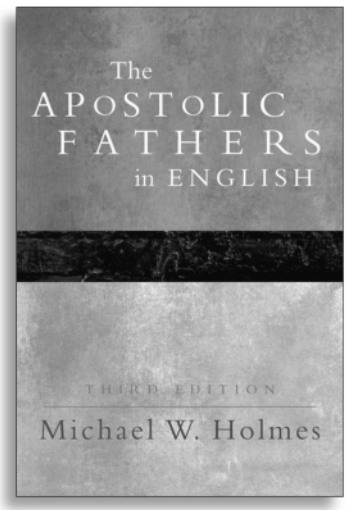

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