

The Evolution of the Nation of Islam
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The change from Elijah Poole to Elijah Muhammad began a long and intricate development of a socioeconomic and religious movement that proved to fully transform radical Black Nationalism from a mere aggregate of para-militarists to an internationally recognized organization of liberation. By observing the four main leaders of the Nation of Islam: Elijah Muhammad; Malcolm X; Wallace Muhammad; and Louis Farrakhan, it can be seen that a definite agenda is put forward by each leader's particular 'revelation'. From the four leaders arise two distinct groups of ideals, as exhibited in their messages and programs, with Louis on the right hand of Elijah, and Wallace beside Malcolm. From theology and political philosophy to basic economic and social policies, the movements of Elijah and Farrakhan greatly differ from those of Malcolm and Wallace. These differences are attributable to sociological realities of the congregants, as well as the social and religious milieu from which the leaders speak.

The early message of the Nation of Islam, under the direct rule of Elijah Muhammad, illustrates some of the fundamental problems of legitimacy and opposition faced by Elijah and his following as a new socio-religious countercultural movement. To illustrate the point, a comparison can be made between the early revelations of the Prophet Muhammad of 'classical' Islam with the revelations of Elijah Muhammad. The messages of both prophets consist mainly of oaths of the

millennium and warnings for the unbeliever. The Prophet Elijah Muhammad exhorts to those who listen, "the judgement of the world has arrived and the gathering of the people is going on," (Lincoln 1961:70). For Elijah, this judgement is a racial judgement, where the oppressed black race will be lifted up by Allah while the white race, which by nature is the embodiment of the devil, will be destroyed and sent to the farthest reaches of hell. In this case Elijah is calling out to the Believers who can only be Black, or more accurately non-white, in much the same manner as the Arab prophet, Muhammad, first calls out to his collection of Believers. In the Qur'an the Prophet relates that "only those who disbelieve will argue about God's signs; ...they [will become] inmates of the fire, (Surah 40: 1)."

With Elijah's message of the millennium there was an offer of salvation to a membership that consisted primarily of poor, illiterate Black males. "We are living in the Days of Allah...In these days of Allah, the righteous will gain power over the wicked and will soon rule the earth...,(Muhammad 1965:23)" says the Prophet Elijah to his dejected following. Elijah's message was empowering to a following that suffered in a system which offered nothing to them except poverty and personal indignity. For young Black males dwelling in the urban squalor of the day, Elijah Muhammad's message offered a final hope in a seeming hopeless situation. With his message of hope, Elijah Muhammad built a strong and dedicated following who lived the truth of Elijah's message, and prayed for the salvation that was offered by the Prophet.

In comparison, it can be seen that the Arab prophet faced a similar following, since many of his early revelations addressed the issue of current indigence and God's coming Justice. Although it is not evident that the great body of early Muslims lived in such abject poverty as had the early members of the Nation of Islam, it can be asserted that the early Muslims consisted primarily of young males, who by their age were of low status, of which many tended to be of low status families within the Meccan family power system (Watt 1961 :34). In this sense the early Muslims of Mecca, like the early Muslims of Detroit, were marginal to the power structure, and the message of the Prophet proved to be liberating. Much like the United States, the merchant city of Mecca "displayed extremes of wealth and poverty... [which] was one of the deep inner causes of [Muhammad's] unsettlement (Gibb 1953:17; 66)." Reminiscent of the assurance offered by Elijah, the Prophet Muhammad says, "Just as [the disbelievers] before them were firmer than You are in strengths, and possessed more wealth and children...their actions will miscarry in this world and Hereafter; those will be the losers (Surah 9:69)1" Thus, an obvious comparison can be made between the messages of the two prophets who preached to marginal, low status males that sought refuge from the 'darker side' of the confining society (Gibb 1953:17).

Having realized an important similarity between the crucial messages and the followers of the prophet of the Hijaz and the prophet of Detroit, it is necessary to consider the large amount of opposition to the two prophets and their revelatory response. Starting in Arabia there need not be too great a discussion about the well-

known, intense opposition to the Prophet Muhammad during the early Meccan history of Islam. Plagued by the oppression of Abu Talib and other powerful Meccan merchants, along with the Hypocrites who falsely avowed Islam and returned to Meccan traditions only to cause difficulty for the Muslims, Muhammad needed a force of legitimacy as well as reassurance (Surah 2:7). At this point of great opposition Muhammad received revelations emphasizing Muhammad as "God's messenger and the Seal of the Prophets, [whose message should be taken seriously and respected] (Surah 33:40)." Encouragement for the Prophet and the Muslims in their struggle also is exhibited with verses such as, "O Prophet, struggle with disbelievers and hypocrites; deal harshly with them, their lodging will be Hell, and how awful is such a destination (Surah 9:73)." Given the changing inner and outer challenges imposed upon the Prophet's movement, the message of the Prophet changed in response.

Such a shaping of the message from general millenarian and liberation statements to direct consideration of opposition also is evident in the growth of the Nation of Islam. The interesting thing to note in this case is that on this issue, the comparison between classical Islam and the Nation of Islam is most significant. Not only does Elijah make legitimate his 'position in response to opposition by asserting "the Apostle is considered one in Allah and Allah is one in the Apostle. So, when you look at one, you see both; when you hear one speak, you hear both...,(Muhammad 1965:253)" but he also reveals a conscious attempt to adopt the persona of the Arab prophet for the furtherance of his movement. Elijah preaches himself to be the 'Seal of the Prophet' and the one prophesied in past books, including the Our'an, (Lomax

1963:96; Muhammad 1965:253). Interestingly enough, Elijah rarely if ever discusses the Arab prophet, and when the issue is addressed Elijah dismisses Muhammad as lacking relevance for the current day situation (Muhammad 1965:287).

It should be emphasized that Elijah was not ignorant of the Qur'an and the doings of the Arab prophet. Although traditional Muslim critics wish to disregard Elijah as ignorant, this does not seem to be the case. Elijah was fully aware of the life of Muhammad as is made clear in such statements as "I am no more to suffer the evil and slanderous talk of the disbelievers as did the Messenger before me (Muhammad 1965:269)." Given this conscious comparison between his situation and the situation of Muhammad, it appears that Elijah downplayed the importance of the Prophet Muhammad so that Elijah could in turn adopt the metaphorical persona of Muhammad as a source of empowerment and legendary resonance. It should be remembered that upon conversion, Elijah was not first given the name Muhammad by Master Fard, the believed incarnation of God on Earth. Not until Elijah was assured positions of leadership, and the inevitable leadership of the whole Nation of Islam, did Elijah adopt the name of Muhammad. With the adoption of the name, Elijah also adopted the whole persona of Muhammad, the Prophet and Messenger of God and the ultimate leader of Islam, Muhammad.

Perhaps Elijah saw the similarities between his movement and that of Muhammad. It is plausible that Elijah saw in the Muslim story of liberation from Mecca what James Cone offers the Black community from the story of the Israelite exodus; liberation. The great parallels cannot be ignored as mere coincidence since

it appears that Elijah did indeed act upon the parallels by adopting the full persona of Muhammad. Given such a scenario, I would be willing to grant the first usage of the concept of Black Liberation Theology to Elijah, except from the Muslim rather than Christian perspective.

The death of Elijah in 1975 brought a great shift in the entire movement's goals and message. Wallace Muhammad, the seventh son of Elijah, assumed the position of leadership for the Nation, and with his newly found power began to adjust the Nation of Islam based on the changing needs of the changing membership. Many have accused Wallace of watering down the extreme message of the movement to suit an economic purpose. Typically the opposition to Wallace claims that he "leads the community only by virtue of his father's name...[motivated by] pure business enterprise (Moses 1982:108)." However, on inspection of the shift in the movement, it seems that such critiques are not accurate. Rather than accusing Wallace of sacrificing the movement's original message of Black Nationalism for business interests, it is more accurate to say that Wallace realigned the movement spiritually and economically away from radicalism in response to the needs of the followers of his movement.

Up until the moment of Elijah's death, the Nation of Islam existed primarily as a Black Nationalist movement for the religious and spiritual development, as well as the economic and social uplift, of Black people for, for more than forty years. Given such time, the religious devotion and the autocratic leadership of Elijah towards the success of his movement eventually made a strong impact. Ironically, Elijah's

successful program of uplift essentially undermined itself by its very success. Great changes in the spiritual and socio-economic needs of the followers had to be met in order for the movement to continue into the future. Wallace Muhammad represents not only a member of the new Muslims, he also represents the necessary leadership of the new Muslims.

Before approaching the task of considering the spiritual shift in the Nation of Islam it is necessary to address the issue of the much maligned socioeconomic shift. Among some of the fundamental changes that Wallace instituted were the criticisms of strict Black Nationalism and separatism, and the association between white people and the devil. Membership became opened to whites and the idea of white people as the devil became changed to a notion that "there is no devil just limited to white flesh. Any man can be a devil...(Marsh 1981 :174)" given diabolical intentions. Similarly, Wallace called for Blacks to embrace the United States and the power to vote, since a separate Black nation no longer could be a relevant issue. The movement shifted from exclusionary nationalism to inclusive internationalism, with all people able to become a part of the new movement, the World Community of Islam in the West.

The crucial factor in this shift in policy is the drastic change within the changing membership. As Elijah's membership grew in number, it also grew in gross wealth and level of education. By the time Wallace achieved power, 80% of the movement fell into the category of middle class Blacks with a college degree (Marsh 1981 :209). Given this, it is evident that Elijah's "appeal to all members to sacrifice at least five cents from each day's pay to create an 'Economic Savings Plan' (Muhammad

1965:192)" proved highly successful. However, the interpersonal relationships of many Blacks on racially mixed college campuses had to include members of the dominant white population; such interpersonal relationships inevitably had to lead to some friendships, or at least contact, and a humanization of Whites, in contrast to the previous concept of the white devil. Many college- educated Black Muslims even faced the dilemma of interracial marriage, which would have meant permanent expulsion from the Nation of Islam as run by Elijah (Marsh 1981). Elijah's original message of Black separatism could not be maintained as the unavoidable interracial discourse from various interpersonal relations grew more 'common on college campuses across the nation.

A similar condition can be seen in terms of the role of women within Wallace's movement. As women in the movement grew more educated, they refused to be subjugated to work solely in the kitchen. Eventually, with more women educated about the feminist critique, the Black Muslim woman inevitably had to be 'encouraged as a woman to fulfill her mental capabilities' so that it was not unheard of for a man to have a female boss within the World Community of Islam (Marsh 1981). With higher education came higher possibilities for the social status of women, and thus the movement had to be adapted to meet these possibilities.

As a final consideration of the social and economic changes that Wallace imposed, it is necessary to address the Nation of Islam from the perspective of theoretical sociology. As described by Marsh, a successful movement, such as that of Elijah Muhammad, which attains an economic and social base will develop a general

accommodation to the larger society (Marsh 1981:210). This is witnessed in the new movement of Wallace Muhammad where the economic base became integrated within the larger society. In order for the World Community of Islam in the West to maintain its economic base, the movement had to engage in the national and international business world, which included not only monies from the Arab world for the funding of mosques, but also business deals in agriculture and real estate with Japanese and American corporations (Marsh 1981:184). Such a growth in operation obviously could not have been maintained with a nationalist and separatist framework, yet the movement, with its great economic base from better educated and wealthier members, had outgrown its original, comparatively smaller business ventures. By changing the radical message, Wallace accommodated to the changes brought on by the success of the original movement.

In terms of religion, Elijah's movement also was too successful with regards to the religious fervor and commitment that was attained by the Muslims. The commitment of the Nation of Islam to give up Christianity and learn the practice of Islam, as instilled by Elijah, eventually led the followers to realize the persona that Elijah assumed. The success of Elijah's religious teaching led to his eventual denunciation, as is seen with his own son, Wallace, who represents this iconoclastic realization. In particular, Wallace's experience and education in Cairo granted the realization that his father's religion was a "homemade brand of Islam (Marsh 1981:155)."

To a congregation of marginal, urban dwellers that have neither heard of the Prophet Muhammad nor understand the tenets of classical Islam, the preaching of Elijah Muhammad seems unique and the embodiment of prophethood. As was discussed previously, Elijah definitely fostered this vision of prophethood by using the life of Muhammad as a model for a prophetic persona to lead the Nation of Islam. However, with magazines such as "Muhammad Speaks," a weekly radio broadcast, and an observed litany of "Mr. Muhammad teaches us," greatly resembling the traditional Muslim Hadith, it appears that Elijah made a great attempt at keeping the Nation of Islam away from the teachings of that other Muhammad so as to continue his image as the true Prophet of God (Lincoln 1961:159). Although Muhammad welcomed the invitations of Muslim countries for ambassadors from the Nation of Islam to visit the Arab world, Muhammad had no intention to incorporate the teachings of traditional Islam within the body of the Nation of Islam. It was not until after Elijah came under fire from traditional Muslims that Elijah addressed the differences between the two brands of Islam by asserting "the orthodox Muslims will have to bow to the choice of Allah...a new Islam (Muhammad 1965:50)." Elijah's power as the Prophet of God based in Chicago depended on the ignorance of the people about traditional Islam and the nature of the Arab prophet.

As with the economic and social changes, the spirituality of the Nation of Islam had to change with the increasing education of the membership. Wallace, and the rest of the new generation of Black Muslims, in their devoted studies of Islam could only see the gross contradictions between the Nation of Islam and traditional Islam.

Elijah could not keep these middle class, college-educated Muslims from learning the truth about both prophets. With travels to the Arab world, Wallace and others saw that the Prophet of Islam can only be the Prophet of the Hijaz, and similarly God could not be embodied in Master Fard, but instead "Allah is a supernatural being (Marsh 1981:174)."

Elijah certainly realized the threat that Wallace and the growing number of Muslims that studied classical Islam posed to the position of Elijah as Prophet. After Wallace's studies in Cairo and his denunciation of Master Fard's role as God, Elijah suspended Wallace from the movement, since there was no room in Elijah's movement for traditional Islam. It was not until the death of Elijah, the almighty Prophet, that Wallace could make any spiritual changes towards traditional Islam. Thus, despite Elijah's attempts at keeping his followers unaware of the message of traditional Islam, the religious zeal along with the opportunity for education allowed the economic and social uplift offered by Elijah, brought a realization of Elijah's role to the new Nation. Elijah did indeed lead the Nation of Islam to traditional Islam, and in this sense is seen as being of great religious importance to the Black Muslims following Wallace Muhammad. However, this new generation of Muslim recognized the Arab prophet as the true Prophet of God, while Elijah merely filled the persona. These Muslims see Wallace's policy shifts as the "fulfillment of his father's work, (Marsh 1981:167)" which led the Muslims to the rightly guided path of true Islam.

At this point it is important to consider the very seed out of which the active shift in policy began; Malcolm X. Regardless of the rhetoric that permeates pop-

culture with regards to Malcolm, there is no denial that Malcolm, as a spokesperson of the Nation of Islam, was a different man from Malcolm separate from the Nation of Islam. By the last year of Malcolm's life, the disciple of Elijah Muhammad had grown from a separatist rhetoretician, accepting Elijah Muhammad as the Messenger of God, to an international liberator under the aegis of traditional Islam. Malcolm represents the influential beginning of the inevitable changes that took place after the death of Elijah. The tragic flaw in Malcolm was that he was years ahead of his time and could not accept the state of the Nation of Islam in hope of the eventual death of Elijah Muhammad, as was the case with Wallace. Malcolm was motivated by his religious and social cause, and was eventually killed because of it.

In approaching Malcolm's social calling, it is necessary to reiterate my previous conclusion that Elijah Muhammad's social and economic program proved to be too successful. The need for change was inevitable as the members of the movement gained greater social and economic status. This is particularly evident for Malcolm, who brought the movement from "little more than mysticism in the rhetoric of unity with Africans and Asians (Marsh 1981:213)" into the domestic and international political spheres. By appointing Malcolm as the travelling representative of the Nation of Islam, Elijah in essence forced Malcolm away from the original movement. Particularly during Malcolm's trips as an emissary of Elijah in search of political and monetary support from the Arab world, did Malcolm see a vision of "internationalizing the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the 'Civil Rights' movement into an international human rights struggle (Marsh 1981:145)."

The most influential point in Malcolm's career that serves as a marker of the definitive break from the ideals of the Nation of Islam was his performance on the hajj in the holy city of Mecca. Upon arrival to the Arab world, Malcolm was offered the warmest of welcomes by such important international politicians as Dr. Mahmoud Shawarbi of the Saudi Embassy, and even the royal family in Saudi Arabia. This welcome "by [men] who would be called in America 'white' [men, touched Malcolm so deeply that by the time of his pilgrimage in Mecca] Malcolm discovered that he was the only one who was color conscious [within the Holy City] (Clarke 1990:244; 75)." The realization that Islam accepts all colors of people left Malcolm to reject "the racial ideology which he had advocated as a Black Muslim (Cone 1991 :205)" for a more universal brand of struggle. In the words of Jamil al-Amin, formerly known as H. Rap Brown, "Black Nationalism could not be successful because Allah has said in the Our'an that he has created the races and divided men into nations and tribes that they might get to know each other, not that they would despise each other (speech at Emory University, 2 December, 1991)." The hajj brought Malcolm to see how the divided nations could come together in brotherhood, and as a result, much of his social philosophy changed.

After the announced break from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm soon grew to see himself as a warrior, travelling the globe fighting the capitalist and imperialist system that served to oppress people of color in the Third World (Clarke 1990:263). Through his work with groups such as the Organization of African Unity, Malcolm sought to put to work his international vision of "a society in which there could exist honest

white-black brotherhood" (Malcolm X 1965:381). Malcolm believed in the possibility of racial harmony and saw the need for inclusion of whites into the struggle, since "in many parts of the African continent [he] saw white students helping Black people (Clarke 1990:122)." The key for Malcolm was not racial separation, but something on a grander scale, the destruction of the capitalist and imperialist exploitative structure.

Moving on to consider Malcolm's spiritual break from the Nation of Islam, it can be seen that with Malcolm's religious devotion, he eventually saw through the mask of Elijah as the Messenger of God, and made an acceptance of the Arab prophet of traditional Islam. Once again, turning to Malcolm's tour through the Arab world, it is evident that ,Malcolm was influenced greatly by traditional Muslims. During his stay in Egypt, Malcolm was offered a copy of The Eternal Message of Muhammad, with the Muhammad discussed being the Meccan prophet and not the prophet in Chicago. This traditional influence culminated with the hajj, as Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz, recounted in her statement "[Malcolm] went to Mecca as a Black Muslim and there he became only a Muslim (Marsh 1981:156)."

Given the fundamental shifts that Malcolm went through, he held a great amount of influence upon the structural changes later imposed by Wallace Muhammad. In transforming from a separatist Black Muslim to a universal fighter for brotherhood as a mainstream Muslim, Malcolm started to share in much of his sociopolitical and religious studies with Wallace. During the expulsion of Wallace from the movement due to his refusal to accept Fard as God, "one of Wallace's most

confidential companions was Malcolm X (Marsh 1981:155}." From his studies in Egypt, Wallace offered to Malcolm a good deal of religious knowledge, including the fundamentals of Arabic. From his extensive travels throughout the world and his understanding of world-wide political liberation movements, Malcolm could offer to Wallace the framework of a new Nation of Islam that engaged in the world arena of economics and politics. Armed with a new religion and political and economic philosophy, Wallace and Malcolm would have been in a good position to usurp direct control from Elijah, except for the Fruit of Islam, the para-military organization that attempted to kill Malcolm numerous times before his eventual murder. After his expulsion and eventual re-admission to the Nation, Wallace was content to sit and wait for the eventual death of Elijah. Malcolm could not wait, his "intentness on brotherhood cost him his life (Clarke 1990:121)."

Regardless of Malcolm's significance as the spark for change within the Nation of Islam, Elijah's influence of the great majority of Malcolm's Muslim life should still be recognized. It was Elijah who gave Malcolm "the root lesson [of Islam while serving time in prison] (Clarke 1990:61)." Similarly, it was Elijah who offered Malcolm the career as the spokesperson of Islam throughout the world. Elijah pushed Malcolm into dissent by pursuing "the [Black] Muslim dream...[which was to be] recognized and supported by Muslims throughout the world as an integral part of Islam (Lincoln 1961 :219)." Had Elijah been content with leaving the group isolated from traditional Islam, and allowed Malcolm to pursue political goals solely in America, Malcolm would have been less likely to leave the movement for traditional Islam and

a universal liberation front. Elijah's vision of a large-scale economic, political movement that was at the same time religiously legitimate proved to be the undoing of his position of influence with Malcolm.

Serving as the Messenger of Allah for the marginal male Black youth, Elijah ran a movement that proved to be too successful. This success, which resulted in the economic, educational, social, and spiritual uplift of these marginal Black masses, in the end undermined Elijah's position as the needs of the new membership grew beyond the confines of the old Nation of Islam. Under the indirect leadership of Malcolm, and the direct leadership of Wallace, the movement grew to accommodate their actions to the society at large, while emphasizing mainstream Islam and racial harmony. Such accommodations were mandatory, given the greater economic and educational level attained by the membership, which granted the membership opportunities to engage in interracial dialogue and larger scale business ventures. Similarly, the tangible results of the religious zeal taught by Elijah, led to the dedicated study of Islam and revealed the Prophet Elijah as an imitation of the true Arab prophet. Wallace and Malcolm, having been raised within the early tradition of the Nation of Islam were the beneficiaries of Elijah's successful program. Ironically, these prodigal sons of the old movement represent the necessary new leadership who "foresaw the natural evolution [of this new generation of Black Muslims] (Marsh 1981 :203)."

To many, the main importance of historical interpretation *lies* in the fact that an understanding of the past can aid to an understanding of the present and future. In the case of the Nation of Islam, this is most certainly true. If we can understand

the change from the Nation of Islam to the World Community of Islam in the West as being the direct result of the changing socioeconomic status of the membership towards the middle class, we also can understand the resurgence of the traditional, Elijah Muhammad brand of the Nation of Islam within recent times. Although the World Community of Islam, now called the American Muslim Mission, has grown by 40% since the split, and has attained the position of the largest American educators of Islam and Arabic, as well as the sole American Muslim representative to the governments of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sharja, and Abu Dhabi, the Nation of Islam, as recreated and led by Minister Farrakhan, grows at an equally astonishing rate (Muhammad, R. 1982:128).

Minister Louis Farrakhan, previously Louis X, at one time supported the movement of Wallace, but later chose to return to the original message of Elijah Muhammad. A quotation, already used in the body of this work, which admits the vision of Malcolm and Wallace as being "the fulfillment of [Elijah Muhammad's] work," actually comes from the lips of Minister Farrakhan. However, with the truth of the new message of Wallace and Malcolm, the relevance of Elijah's old message was not destroyed, but merely made unimportant for the middle class Black Muslims. The growing number of hopeless and poverty-stricken Blacks fighting for their lives in urban slums can only prove the relevance of Elijah Muhammad's original message. Now, more than ever, as crack babies and gang violence become a natural part of everyday existence, the need for the promise of justice and deliverance, as well as the vent for anger and hatred, is of an exigent nature. Minister Farrakhan is the necessary

continuation of the message of the hope of redemption from the current hell experienced by much of the Black community.

Although, due to the almost non-existent documentation of Minister Farrakhan's movement, there is very little that can be concluded about the personal motivation behind Farrakhan's split from Wallace's movement, it is evident that Farrakhan serves an important purpose. As one member affirms, "What attracted me to Farrakhan was his deep concern for the despised of American society (Mamiya 1982:149)." Wallace's movement, in adapting to the needs of the middle class, does not speak to the socioeconomic and spiritual needs of the underprivileged, much in the same way the uplifting message no longer speaks to the middle class. With his scathing remarks about the inevitable downfall of the white oppressor and the rise of the Black children of God, Farrakhan speaks to those without hope or understanding of the current racist system in the United States.

The legacy of Elijah Muhammad continues to live on into the modern day and the coming future. However, this legacy must be accepted by those who followed Wallace Muhammad into mainstream Islam, as well as by those of the current nation of Islam led by Minister Farrakhan. Just as the Nation of Islam continues to show great respect for Mr. Muhammad's liberating message and program, so should the new, middle class Muslims acknowledge the realization of what Mr. Muhammad showed them could be achieved. Elijah Muhammad's movement, having split into two distinct groups, at the very least represents the possibilities that can be achieved, as well as how far is left to go.

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