

**Imam Abdul Karim Hassan
and
the Black Muslim Experience: Striking a
Balance between Religious and Socio-Political Demands**

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Abstract. This study traces the development of the Black Muslim movement in the United States of America from a separatist and revolutionary socio-political movement, using an erroneous Islamic nomenclature, to its current state as a movement committed both to mainstream American socio-political values and to mainstream Islamic tenets. Through the personal account of the experience of Imam Abdul Karim Hassan, a present day Moslem religious and community leader in Los Angeles, California, the article portrays the typical conversion experiences of African Americans to Islam during the sixties and seventies. Most of these converts started out as non-conformists and later adopted pro-establishment attitudes while exercising their religious freedom.

The Black Muslim experience in the United States is unique in many respects. For one thing, it relied on religious and cultural concepts which were not indigenous to the American society in general and the African American experience of the period in particular. It offered the Black Muslims a different interpretation of their history at large and required them to undergo a rethinking of their identity in a pluralistic society. Yet, the Black Muslim experience is typically American in that it is the product of the social and economic circumstances prevalent in American society during the first half of the twentieth century.

The experience is also unique from the standpoint of the history of the spread of Islam to new territories. Although in its beginning, the Black Muslim movement cannot be qualified as typically Islamic, it nevertheless laid the groundwork for the subsequent

ideological alignment of the movement with mainstream Islam. Barring these reservations, we can see in the Black Muslim experience in America a rare example of historical circumstances where the spread of Islam was not the consequence of conquest or of close trade ties and continuous contacts with an Islamic nation. This is rather a case where Islam spread as an acceptable answer to an indigenous social crisis. And it all began with an innocuous accident of history, essentially the presence of W.D. Farad—an immigrant with a Moslem background—and his contacts with African Americans in Detroit, Michigan.

What follows will, I hope, clarify these aspects of the Black Muslim movement. It is a biographical sketch and a personal account of the experience of an active member in the movement, compiled from a series of interviews with Imam Abdul Karim Hassan conducted in Los Angeles in 1984. The interviewee is currently the Imam (religious leader) of "Masjid Felix Bilal" (Felix Bilal mosque) in Los Angeles, California. Hassan started out as a non-conformist Black American who later adopted pro-establishment attitudes. His later dual allegiance to mainstream Islam and mainstream America helped him attain spiritual satisfaction and economic amelioration. Today, he divides his time as an Imam of a fairly large mosque in Los Angeles and as president of a successful real estate development company.

Roots of the Movement and Hassan's Early Conversion

Looking back at the religious aspect of the Black Muslim movement during its early phases, it is fair to state that from the point of view of orthodox Islam, teaching genuine Islamic precepts and rituals to the new converts could not have been the overriding and primary goal of the movement. Because of its many theological peculiarities during the years preceding 1975, the Black Muslim movement is better viewed as one of the many socio-political movements perhaps unique in its practical framework, aimed at voicing the grievances of African-Americans loud enough to be heard. The fact that it had Islamic overtones was incidental to the cultural and religious background of the original theorizer of the movement, W.D. Farad Muhammad. The Islamic overtones introduced by Farad and later developed by Elijah Mohamed, the de-facto leader of the Black movement, were relatively new to the Black experience in America at that time. The fact that they did take root and even flourish among African-Americans is nevertheless significant in that it underlines the latter's real hunger for a distinct historical, cultural, and personal identity; a hunger which characterized almost all socio-political movements among Black people at the beginning of this century.⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ For the concept of identity, see T.R. Young and Paul Chassy, "La Restauration d'une identité: Les Black Muslims," *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, 51 (1971), 277-89; Essiem Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search For an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

The Black American Muslims were for decades subjected to a stigmatized reputation for their militantism and harsh racial rhetoric.⁽²⁾ They were able to reach a more tolerable notability only after Wareth Deen Mohammad, son of Elijah Mohammad, took over the leadership in 1975 with a plan to mainstream the movement religiously, by moving to orthodox Islam, and politically, by integrating the American system. From "Black Muslims," they were referred to simply as "Muslims."⁽³⁾ The adopted pronunciation "Muslim" out of the epithet "Moslem," commonly used in Western literature and outside the United States, is phonetically closer to the Quranic Arabic pronunciation, signifying "one who submits to the will of Allah." The phrase "Black Muslims" was coined by the Afro-American scholar, C. Eric Lincoln in 1960.⁽⁴⁾ The expression has since characterized this non-mainstream marginal black sect. The appellation often seems to carry a pejorative connotation when uttered or explained by non-Moslems. At any rate, most Black American Muslims did not mind the new qualifier and even adopted it especially after many of them learned the Arabic language. For clarity, the term "Muslim" will be used in the rest of this paper to designate the new African American converts to Islam in the U.S., and will restrict the term "Moslem" to refer to other followers of Islam the world over.

Abdul Karim Hassan came to prominence in the African-American Muslim community first in the state of Connecticut in 1962, and later in Los Angeles, California in 1971. Imam Hassan, as he is known within his community, underwent a gradual spiritual transformation in 1975 that ultimately placed him among the advocates of "pure" Islam among today's Black Muslims. The ongoing religious odyssey of Imam Hassan throws light on the conversion experiences, both political and religious, of numerous Black American Muslims along the difficult road of positive personal metamorphosis.

We can identify roughly two periods in the Islamic experience of Imam Hassan, corresponding to the periods of leadership of the two principal leaders of the Black Muslim movement under whom Imam Hassan acquired his knowledge of Islam. The first period under Elijah Mohammad extended from 1956 to 1975 and was characterized by Elijah's pseudo-Islamic and separatist teachings. The second period under Elijah's son, Wareth Deen Mohammad, extends from 1975 to the present and marks the

⁽²⁾ About racism within the movement, see Scott Grant McNall, "The Sect Movement," *Pacific Sociological Review*, 6, No. 2 (1996), 60-64; Perry E. Glanakos, "The Black Muslims: An American Millennialistic Response to Racism and Cultural Deracination," *The Centennial Review*, 23, No. 4 (1979), 430-51.

⁽³⁾ Pertaining to the mainstream of the movement, see Ernest Clifton March, "The World Community of Islam in the West: from Black Muslims to Muslims," *Dissertation*, 1977; Raquel Ann Muhammad, "Black Muslim Movement after the Death of Elijah Muhammad," Univ. of California, Dept. of History, 1980; James Emerson Shitehurst, "The Mainstreaming of the Black Muslims: Healing the Hate," *Christian Century*, 97, No. 6 (1989), 225; Luix Overbea, "Black Muslims: Shift from Militancy to Emphasis of Religion," *Christian Science Monitor*, 77 (May 6, 1985), 4.

⁽⁴⁾ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

movement's turn into mainstream Islam. Under the leadership of both father and son, Imam Hassan's conversion and Islamic education was gradual despite going through some drastic transformations.

One may speak of a maturing process experienced by the Muslim converts, a process characterized by the constant give-and-take between theological and socio-political priorities. Thus, during the initial phases of the movement, the new religious concepts introduced by the early figures of the movement were the first and primary tools used to attract the attention of the African-Americans. They gave the disillusioned African-Americans of the time the necessary framework for a new cultural identity, different from the one which had alienated them, namely the culture of their former masters. Once the recruits grew in number and the movement picked up momentum and became part of the Black American scene, socio-political and economic objectives became the driving force. No noticeable changes occurred in the theological side. This was the period of the ideas of Black Power of the 1960s and this was the heyday of Malcolm X within the Black Muslim Movement.

After the death of Elijah Mohammad in 1975, theological considerations sprang to the forefront and the movement slowly moved from a peculiar brand of Islam to a theologically universal Islam based solely on Quranic principles. On the socio-political side, the Black Muslims' later integration into the American economic and political secular system further removed them from their early separatist scheme.

The recent changes were given official status by Wareth Deen Mohammad. Thanks to his efforts and the efforts of some of the competent and open-minded mosque leaders, the old stigma attached to the movement and the slurred reputation and anguish its members suffered soon gave way to a far more tolerable notability. The initial notoriety surrounded one main figure in the history of the Black Muslim movement, namely the late Malcolm X, key spokesman for the movement, in the 1960s. Malcolm X was partially if not completely responsible for the dichotomous ill-repute/high visibility of the group. The mass media and the official reports of the time gave a downright negative picture of the movement whose members they branded as "fanatic," "hate-mongers," and "marginals." Yet, the movement had a great appeal to many Black Americans; and Malcolm X's posthumous recognition as a valid Black leader was a further proof of his positive contribution to the movement.

Remnants of the trends which shaped the history of the movement are still visible. From a historical point of view, the present day brouhaha caused by Louis Farrakhan, leader of the resurrected Nation of Islam, and the concerns it raises among establishment circles is a *déjà-vu* situation finding its roots in rhetoric in the old separatist scheme. For this splinter group, the pendulum of history remained in the side of socio-political concerns. In this paper, we will have nothing more to say about Louis Farrakhan and his movement, as Imam Hassan, after the death of Elijah Muhammad and the split in the

Black Muslim movement, chose to align himself with the orthodox Muslim leader Wareth Deen Mohammad.⁽⁵⁾

Imam Abdul Karim Hassan is a live witness to the tumultuous history of the Black American Muslims. He was born in Camden, New Jersey, on September 25, 1931. He was the seventh child in a family of eleven children. A Moorish uncle, attracted to the teachings of the Pan Africanist Marcus Garvey, named the new child Abdelkarim, after a Moroccan nationalist who fought the French occupation of Morocco during the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁽⁶⁾ It was the time of the great depression and the family had to move South to Kingstree, South Carolina, where Imam Hassan's father became a share-cropper on a farm. The children were able to attend elementary school, but life for the thirteen family members was rather hard.

As a child, Imam Hassan was not insulated from the socio-political movements which were sweeping the African-American community at the time. Despite material poverty, there was enough intellectual richness and political awareness in the family to orient and shape the child's attitude. During that period, Imam Hassan's religious experience was not deeply grounded in Christianity. His father, Newton McCullough, used to take the children to St. Marcus Methodist Church where their grandfather was a pastor. They celebrated the holiest Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter. His mother, Larl NeSmith, he explained, was "never a blind follower of the Christian faith."⁽⁷⁾

Christianity was not a solid religion for my mother. She used to question many aspects of Christianity. She was a strong leader in our family in terms of directing us to nationalism, self-worth, self-respect, and things of that nature.⁽⁸⁾

Given this orientation, Hassan's mother became a follower of the messianic Pan Africanist, Marcus Garvey. In the late teens and early 1920s, Marcus Garvey was an immensely popular figure among black Americans. He preached nothing less than "the

⁽⁵⁾ Some newspaper and magazine articles dating from 1964 on the controversial Farrakhan include: Leeh May, "Farrakhan Stirs Black Hope, White Fear," *Los Angeles Times*, 103, Section 1 (May 13, 1984), 1; Carlyle Murphy, "Muhammad Ali Decries Farrakhan's Words: Leader Accused of Mistaken Islam," *Washington Post*, 107 (July 5, 1984), C6; "Several Black Muslims Denounce Farrakhan," *New York Times*, 133 (July 5, 1984), 10; Larry Muhammad, "Louis Farrakhan: Muslim Leader or Hypocrite?," *Sepia*, 29 (April 1989), 30; *idem.*, "The Muslims, Five Years after Elijah: Imam Wallace Sets Own Course; Farrakhan is a Challenger," *Sepia* 29 (March 1980), 3(7); David Gates, "The Black Muslims: a Divided Flock," *Newsweek*, 103 (April 9, 1984), 15.

⁽⁶⁾ The spelling of Imam Hassan's first name underwent two subsequent changes. Elijah Muhammad suggested to spell it as Abdul Karriem because the spelling was closer to the initial name that Farad wished to give him. It was again changed to Abdul Karim by Wareth Deen Mohammad, who wanted it to be closer to the pronunciation in Arabic. This attention to details is typical of Black Muslims.

⁽⁷⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 1, 1984.

⁽⁸⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, October 27, 1984.

redemption of Africa for Africans.”⁽⁹⁾ Garvey advocated racial integrity and racial solidarity among Blacks by means of an economic cooperation in black-owned business projects, an idea which Black Muslims did put into practice. One expression borrowed from Garvey which was later greatly cherished by the Black Muslims was “up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will,” a sentence reiterated and displayed in most black educational and professional institutions. Mrs. Hassan participated in the Garvey parades and even bought stock in the Black Star Line.⁽¹⁰⁾ She was nationalistically minded and cherished race pride and dignity. In turn, Imam Hassan has nothing but praise for the man and his ideas and seemed to share in the widespread belief that Garvey’s demise was the result of a conspiracy by the white establishment carried out by black collaborators.

Garvey’s program was sound. Your need to read the other side of the literature because the Whites’ media is subjective. They even used an intellectual black elite educated by the ruling authority to fight and ridicule Garvey’s movement. His own people betrayed him and helped with his deportation. The man was fantastic and was aware of the Blacks’ miserable lot. Booker T. Washington was what we would call “Uncle Tom” because he taught us to turn the other cheek.⁽¹¹⁾

In the 1940s, Hassan’s family moved back north to Hartford, Connecticut in search of a new spiritual and economic beginning. There, Hassan’s mother discovered and adopted the ideas of the Moorish movement which were a blend of black nationalistic rhetoric and a spiritual faith different from Christianity. The leader of the Moorish American movement was Noble Drew Ali, former Timothy Drew, a Black American from North Carolina, who founded the first Moorish American Science Temple in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913.⁽¹²⁾ He was claimed by many African-Americans as the “first American prophet of Islam.”⁽¹³⁾ Drew taught blacks to refuse the epithets

⁽⁹⁾ “Africa for Africans” is a phrase coined by Bishop H. Turner in 1870. The separatist/integrationist dichotomy was elaborated by Turner and Frederick Douglas.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Black Star Line was created by Marcus Garvey in 1919 to operate a worldwide network of steamships. It was a fiasco enterprise and in 1922, it ceased operating. The ships were manned by black men, so that “our race, too, would be respected in the mercantile and commercial world,” claimed Garvey. Refer to Lawrence W. Levine, “Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization,” in Hope Franklin and August Meir, eds., *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 127.

⁽¹¹⁾ Author’s interview with Imam Hassan, November 1, 1984. Booker T. Washington, the late 19th century black spokesman, was according to historian Louis R. Harlan, chosen by white elites to represent blacks. See his article in John Franklin and August Meier, eds. *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 1. Although several Black Americans, past and present, often call Booker T. Washington an “Uncle Tom,” i.e., one who maintains a slave mentality, Washington had several followers amongst Blacks who acknowledged his successful economic programs. At any rate, it should not be expected from the militant Black Muslims to adhere to Washington’s accommodationsist and integrationist philosophy.

⁽¹²⁾ Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 53.

⁽¹³⁾ Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 34.

“Negroes,” “black folk,” and “colored people.” He explained to them that they were Moslems whose ancestors had inhabited Morocco before they were enslaved in North America. He also urged them to reconvert to their original religion and abide by the Holy Quran, a sacred book which included God’s teachings.⁽¹⁴⁾

Imam Hassan’s family became Moorish and remained so until 1955. As far as Islamic teachings were concerned, Hassan in particular was aware that they were not authentic. Drew’s Islamic contribution to Black Americans was mainly in urging them to adopt Arabic names and the inclusion of the Arabic definite article “Al” before the name as an indication of noble origins and family or tribal recognition. Other Moorish peculiarities were more showy in nature. Drew insisted for example that his followers wear a red headgear known as the “Fez.”

As a Moorish American before I joined the Nation of Islam, I did accept many things as Islam. The Moorish Americans did have the right idea because they moved away from Christianity, but they did not have the right leader to enforce the rules. Many ate pork and drank whisky. We did accept many things as Islam. We did not know then how strict the religion was until we were under the honourable Elijah Muhammad. Noble Drew concentrated only on what was happening in Morocco. Elijah extended in teachings to the international struggle, Asian, African, South Pacific, Carribean history... I remember in my teens, I used to have a cap with a red Fez... I was different from the Christian kids. Everybody used to call me “Red Cap.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Another key person who greatly shaped Elijah’s thinking and that of his followers was the mysterious W.D. Farad Muhammed whose history begs for further research and accurate documentation. A proliferation of conjectures and guesses pertain to his origins and racial identity. The interviewee claimed that Farad was of Pakistani origin. Some say he is an Arab, perhaps a Syrian or a Saudi from the Qureish tribe, the tribe of Prophet Muhammad, who came to Detroit, Michigan in 1930. Presenting himself as a simple peddler, he started a cautious proselytization campaign amongst the poorest Blacks of Detroit, in the streets, and later in their homes. Some bought his Pakistani silk, Moroccan leather, or African beads: but in most cases they remained indifferent to his ethical lessons. It was only a year later that he grew audacious, and in August 1931, he announced at a Black gathering in the old Garveyist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) hall at 1841 West Lake Street, that he was a “prophet of Allah from the holy city of Mecca,” and that he came to America to forewarn people about the impending Armageddon war which according to Imam Hassan’s vague knowledge, was supposed to take place in 1984. The Armageddon myth is supposedly the final clash between good and evil, the former represented by blacks and the latter by whites and where at last good prevails.⁽¹⁶⁾

⁽¹⁴⁾ Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 55.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Author’s interview with Imam Hassan, November 1, 1984.

⁽¹⁶⁾ “Nation of Islam Deserted,” *African Mirror*, 2 (August-September 1979), 37.

This foreigner was a mysterious and conspicuous figure. Nevertheless he succeeded in drastically indoctrinating one important person, Elijah Mohammad, then Elijah Poole, and imbibe him with a self-concocted Islamic ideology that did not concord with universally accepted Islamic precepts. Farad's mission was to redeem the blacks in America who he called the "lost-found members of the tribe of Shabbaz."⁽¹⁷⁾ One wonders how knowledgeable he was in religion, for his intensive lessons about world history and Islam lacked authenticity. In his teachings, he relied on myths which were highly symbolic, sometimes witty but irreligious in nature. The story of Armageddon was one. Another fantastic story which he used was the "Yacub Myth." An extensive narrative of the Yacub myth, seemingly common knowledge amongst Black Muslims, was recounted by Imam Hassan tongue in cheek. It's the story of a black scientist called Yacub, who grafted the white man from the black man. Apparently, it took six hundred years for this scientist to graft one white man out of a brown gene. First, yellow men were grafted, then white men. These white men caused trouble in their native Arabia so the king of the land forced them out of their territory. The whites had to walk to Europe, and because of the ordeal of the journey, they became savage. That is how the European continent came to be populated.

Quite obviously, the Yacub Myth was meant and used to counteract the effects of the common racist stereotype of the racial inferiority of Blacks. Another legend, the "Shabbaz Myth," was similarly used to reinforce the superiority of the Black race, and further bestowed on Blacks an Asian origin. The Shabbaz legend tells that all dark people originate from the Shabbaz tribe, the first race created in Asia. It was Dr. Shabbaz, a gifted Asian scientist, who populated the continent of Africa by taking his family and friends to experiment and work in the jungle of Africa alongside the animals. Because of the hot climate, their features eventually became Negroid.

The Shabbaz Myth is interesting in that it may provide a clue to the mysterious origins of W.D. Fard. Although some swear to his Arabian origin, his name, Fard or Farad, and his frequent mentioning of Shabbaz, show at least from the choice of the names that he could be a Pakistani Moslem. Fard is very close to Farad, a popular name in Pakistan. In Pakistani folklore, Farad is also a historical figure who became known for his love for Shireen, a beautiful queen. Farad and Shireen's love story is somewhat similar to Cleopatra and Anthony's. Fard's claim of being from the Qureish tribe in particular or Mecca in general was perhaps one devious way of securing his listeners' belief in his Islamic authenticity, for his teachings never included established facts from the history and the life of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) or his proselytization odyssey. Another speculation would be the probability of his belonging to the Qadiani Ahmadiya sect, a marginal Moslem sect in the North-West Frontier Province known for their distortion of the Quran. His lack of knowledge of Quranic precepts is further shown in his incomplete and selective Islamic teachings. These teachings usually

⁽¹⁷⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, October 27, 1984.

included some genuine Quranic laws such as the injunctions against drinking alcohol, eating pork, and committing adultery. He also taught the rituals of Islam such as prayer. But unlike the authentic Moslem practice, prayer by the new converts was performed in a standing position, and in front of chairs, instead of prostration. Farad justified this practice by the fact that "blacks had been too long on their knees."⁽¹⁸⁾ He drew from the Bible for brotherly love, compassion and understanding but denounced the white Christians for behaving otherwise. He therefore suggested the Quran as a better alternative for lessons on how to improve oneself and acquire sounder moral righteousness.

In 1931, Farad established the first Muslim temple in Chicago. Three movements dedicated to one of his closest disciples, Elijah Muhammad. Elijah maintained Farad's theological teachings, established a second temple in Chicago (Muhammad Temple No. 2), and gave the movement its socio-political direction. But Black American Muslims still credit Farad for their conversion to Islam. He was acknowledged as an intellectual genius who led blacks to inquire about their glorious past. As a foreigner, he was unique in sensing racial tensions and prejudice in America.

This was essentially the early historical background of Black Muslims before Imam Hassan was born, and this was the basic knowledge that he had to catch up with once he joined the group. It was only in 1956 that Hassan officially joined the Black Muslims. The key person behind this move was Malcolm X, who was at the time the most charismatic spokesman for the so-called Nation of Islam under Elijah Mohammad. Malcolm had responded to an invitation made by the Moorish-Americans to give a speech in Connecticut. The young Hassan admitted he was mesmerized when he heard him and accepted to become a Muslim instantly. It was basically Malcolm X's charismatic personality and fiery speeches that appealed to him. Although Hassan could only remember cliché themes pertaining to racial glory and separatism, it was the style rather than the substance of the speech that ignited his crushed urge to belong to a cause of some sort. Like the bulk of other recruits, Hassan was drawn into the movement with grandiose dreams of self improvement and recognition in such a newly created anti-establishment institution.

Hassan's fascination with Malcolm X was equally shared by others. Many recruits believed that if Malcolm X—practically an illiterate ex-convict, self-taught in prison using only a dictionary—was able to redeem himself and reach fame in a short period of time, then any hopeless social outcast was likely to achieve the same goals. Although Malcolm's boisterous speeches often infuriated white Americans and blemished the

⁽¹⁸⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, October 27, 1984. According to Imam Hassan, Farad was, at the time of the interview, still alive and in the United States, specifically in San Francisco. Despite the handicap of a very serious heart condition, he was allegedly still active propagating Islam. He would have been in his eighties at that time.

Black Muslims' image, his charisma and success in focusing every American's attention on the social inequities present in the United States was unparalleled. Malcolm X's crossed out Christian surname remains a symbol of his rejection of WASPish principles. According to him, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism that categorized most Americans must be replaced by a different ideology, one which would be more in line with Black American ideals.

For the downtrodden, Malcolm X was a breathing example epitomizing hope for the possibility of a complete turnabout from gloomy obscurity into a viable entity. Imam Hassan recalls that:

Malcolm X was a good example for us. He was brilliant. He had the basic information. He knew a lot and more than the people he addressed. He was a specialist of bluffing people. He was 6'4", light-skinned. He was skillful in intimidating people, had quick replies and was sometimes comical and humorous. He used to "blow away" the other civil rights leaders. The NAACP and the Urban League stopped debating with him. He wiped them all. Anyway, he was after the masses, the common Black people. He used to fill all the auditoriums whenever he gave a speech.⁽¹⁹⁾

Malcolm X's notorious reputation as the "angriest man in America," a "hate-monger," and a racist separatist was in actuality not his own doing. He was a disciple trained by Elijah to spread the nationalistic message of the group using Islam as a cover. Malcolm was the ideal choice to give more publicity to Elijah's Nation of Islam. Harsh denigration's of establishment figures and amusing myths and anecdotes were best recounted by Malcolm. He always made a point about something and took a stand against someone. John F. Kennedy, Ralph Bunche, and Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance were often the targets of his criticism. He went as far as rejoicing at the death of Americans in plane crashes justifying them as God's wrath for their injustice.⁽²⁰⁾

His argumentative style often provoked controversies and invited media debates. The major theme reiterated throughout his speeches was separatism from whites. The method used was reverse psychology, a militant indoctrination instilled in black Americans so as to perceive themselves as better persons than the whites in terms of their intellectual ability and professional performance, down to their physical appearance.⁽²¹⁾

Malcolm's tone was in fact aggressive. His speeches reflected resentment towards the white Christians whom he branded as "devilish Caucasians." Moreover, the "satanic whites" vs. "divine blacks" rhetoric fringes upon a dangerous generalization. As one

⁽¹⁹⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 5, 1984.

⁽²⁰⁾ Peter Goldman, "Malcolm X: Witness for the Prosecution," in *Black Leaders*, 308.

⁽²¹⁾ Goldman, "Malcolm X."

author put it, whites were "damned en masse" by reason of their color whether good or bad.⁽²²⁾

Hassan reiterated that his fascination with Malcolm X and the newly founded Nation of Islam was more with form than substance. At that time, he was neither convinced by his mother's Garveyist-Moorish nationalist rhetoric nor by Malcolm's racist separatism. He was aware that the two movements were social movements aimed at uplifting the black race from a destructive and passive salvific mentality to a constructive attitude based on racial pride and self-help. But, while the dietary laws and other moral aspects of the movement were Islamic, other religious aspects taught by Farad and reinforced by Elijah were erroneous and even ludicrous. The deification of Farad after his disappearance and Elijah's proclaiming himself a prophet deny the Black Muslims any Islamic authenticity. Among the erroneous practices was praying in a standing position and in front of chairs. Fasting for three days around Christmas was also un-Islamic. The Moslem practice is to fast for thirty days during the month of Ramadan. Preaching hate, denigration, and separatism based on color was also un-Islamic. Surah 49, verse 13 in the Quran states:

O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) Of a male and a female and made you into Nations and tribes, that you may know each other (Not that you may despise each other).⁽²³⁾

Moreover, the practice of describing the Whites in general as "satanic," and the Blacks in general as "divine" is not acceptable in orthodox Islam. It is reported that Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) said:

O people, verily your God is one and your father is one. Verily, an Arab is not better than a non-Arab, a non-Arab is no better than an Arab; a red man is not better than a black man, and a black man is no better than a red man, except in their fear of God.⁽²⁴⁾

This saying excludes color and race as prerequisites for sincerity in belief.⁽²⁵⁾

⁽²²⁾ Much has been written on Malcolm X during his life and after his death. Some pertinent articles are: Hank Flick, "Malcolm X: The Destroyer and Creator of Myths," *Journal of Black Studies*, 12 (Dec. 1981); Roberta Ann Johnson, "The Prison Birth of Black Power," *Journal of Black Studies*, 5 (June 1975); Tony Thomas, "Malcolm X: His Strategy for Black Liberation," *Socialist Review*, 32, No. 5 (1971), 28-32; Samuel A. Weiss, "The Ordeal of Malcolm X," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 76, No. 4 (1977), 497-507; Jonathan Power, "Malcolm X: A Reassessment," *Encounter*, 41, No. 3 (1973), 33-45; James Boggs, "Beyond Malcolm X," *Monthly Review*, 29, No. 7 (1977), 30-48. For examples of anger and humor used by Malcolm X, see Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965).

⁽²³⁾ *The Holy Quran*, Surah 49, Verse 13, Text Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. New York: Harter, 1946. (All Quranic quotations are from this edition).

⁽²⁴⁾ Al Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*. Vol. 5 (Beirut: Al-Maktib Al-Islami Publications, n.d. Translation is mine, 439).

⁽²⁵⁾ *Muhammad Speaks*, July 8, 1959 denounced the Whites' actions against the black race. Similarly, an article in *Nation*, April 6, 1963, 278, denounced Blacks' actions against Whites, almost giving way to a repartee.

In 1964, Malcolm X performed Hajj, the Moslem rite of pilgrimage to Mecca. There, he learned more about true Islam, changed his name to Al Hajj Malik Al Shabbaz, and became an accredited orthodox Sunni Moslem. Upon his return to the United States, he discarded his previous anti-white rhetoric and somewhat apologized for his past belligerence. He also no longer believed in Elijah as the ‘Messenger of Allah,’ but a fallible regular human being. Interestingly enough, this new attitude contributed to his assassination in 1965, as his foes within the Nation considered his change of heart and mind the ultimate betrayal of their cause.⁽²⁶⁾

Regardless of Malcolm X’s popularity and contributions, not all of Elijah’s teachings were questionable. One of the most positive facets which benefited a number of African-Americans was his stress on education which literally eradicated illiteracy among many recruits. It was often claimed that thanks to the rise of the Black Muslim movement and their emphasis on race pride and auto-didacticism, there was a rebirth of black studies, initially advocated by early Afro-American historians in the 1850s, namely, David Walker, Frederick Douglas, David Ruggles, and Charlotte Forten. Although the Afro-American scholar Carter G. Woodson crusaded for Black Studies, it was not until the Black Muslims made it a point to renew interest in their history and thus filled the lacuna in the established educational institutions.⁽²⁷⁾

Apart from teaching facts – often absent from establishment textbooks – about African Americans, Elijah’s focus was to stress miscellaneous facts about Blacks and dark people anywhere in the world. Ancient history, world geography, math and science were, to Black Muslims, fields that sprang exclusively from African and Moslem scientists and mathematicians. Elijah appointed educational experts to research in books to obtain proof of the intellectual and civilizational superiority of dark peoples. Their ultimate objective was to discard the idea that white people were the sole educators of non-whites. Elijah classified his people as “Afro-Asiatics, olive-skinned people who were the first to bring civilization and learning to the world long before the European Caucasians rose from their caves.”⁽²⁸⁾

Hassan testified to this new anti-white educational outlook.

⁽²⁶⁾ Peter Goldman, an authority of Malcolm X, claims that Malcolm’s assassination was plotted by his own people (not by the FBI or the CIA) because of the internal strife within the Nation of Islam, and essentially because he dared divulge Elijah’s extra-marital affairs. The real mistake made by the court was to imprison three innocent Muslims who had nothing to do with the assassination. See Goldman, “Malcolm X,” 311, and *idem.*, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 398-59. Unlike Goldman, George Breitman refused to accept the official version and instead adhered to a government conspiracy theory, accusing the CIA, the FBI and the New York state police of plotting the assassination. See Malik Miah, ed., *The Assassination of Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), 7-14.

⁽²⁷⁾ Lawrence Crouchet, “Early Black Studies Movements,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 2, No. 2 (1961), 189-200.

⁽²⁸⁾ Experts from Elijah’s teachings in the 1969 *University of Islam Yearbook*, No. 2.

We did learn world history in school. But we never really paid attention to it until Elijah taught it to us and gave us another version from the established education we were required to learn.... We took out maps, separated them in continents, size, and population. We realized that Europe and the U.S.A. were but one small part of the rest of the world. We were taught that the white man insulated the world, that they severed Africans from Africa. Elijah considered the temple as a school. Universal knowledge was taught. Children in 3rd and 4th grades knew about all planets, the solar system, actual historical and mathematical facts. The facts were impressive for the children we taught. More of them were narrow-minded. They couldn't think outside of the ghetto. Before Elijah came, we were confined to a closed circle. It was never "there" but "here." When Elijah told us about Al Islam, right away, we were taken to travel, see the world, let us be "up you Mighty Race. You can accomplish what you will." Another phrase from Marcus Garvey that we incorporated was the "lifting of fallen humanity." Elijah lifted his fallen people. Farad and Elijah were fantastic in this respect.⁽²⁹⁾

When Hassan entered the Nation of Islam in 1956, it was the beginning of an experience in self-discipline and self-fulfillment. Although the religious part in this organization was ambiguous and rather distorted, the Nation's philosophy was the spark that started Hassan's conversion to Islam. To be admitted as a new member, Hassan went through the processing procedures. These procedures were basic and required but an elementary literacy. He was given a letter to copy literally. Reflecting on this orthographic exercise, he said:

It was a letter that we had to copy with no loops in the ts. No crawls in the ls. Your ds must be closed in and your ts crossed out. Then we sent the letter to Chicago. The letter was checked for errors. If there are no mistakes, the letter is sent back as accepted.⁽³⁰⁾

The actual text of the letter was:

Dear Savior Allah. Our Deliverer.

I have been attending the teaching of Islam by one of your ministers, two or three times. I believe in it and I bear witness that there is no God but thee and that Muhammad is thy servant and apostle.⁽³¹⁾

This simple "application letter" was a requirement that anticipated the rigid discipline within the organization and a test of commitment for the prospective converts. Testifying to the oneness of God and to his Prophet was in fact all what is needed to convert to Islam anywhere in the world. However, many aspects of this letter reveal from a religious standpoint the awkward beginnings of the movement. For one thing, the applicants at the time could be confused about the identity of the Mohammad mentioned in the letter, whether it meant Mohammad the real prophet of Islam, or Elijah Muhammad, their self-proclaimed prophet. The reference to "ministers" in the letter

⁽²⁹⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 5, 1984.

⁽³⁰⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 9, 1984.

⁽³¹⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 9, 1984.

further shows that the new organization did not totally break away from Christian concepts. There are no ministers in Islam. The particular aspect was eventually corrected by Wareth Deen Muhammad who changed the title of Minister to Imam.

Although the bulk of the recruits belonged to the lower strata of society – the underprivileged, and all sorts of social outcasts – Hassan did not belong to this category of people. He had graduated with honor from a trade school with a specialization in photography and worked at a dry cleaning store owned by his brother. His thirty-year religious journey with the Nation of Islam and the subsequent American Muslim Mission were marked by working his way up the hierarchy within the two organizations. As an ambitious man aspiring for leadership, he had to undertake multiple tasks to deserve a promotion to the ministry. In 1956, he started as a squad leader, supervising menial janitorial work. A few months later, he acceded to the position of a lieutenant in the Fruit of Islam (FOI), a sort of internal police trained to adhere to the strict rules of the organization. From lieutenant he became a captain in the FOI in Hartford, Connecticut, with similar responsibilities but on a larger scale. Hassan was still aspiring for the ministry and he started studying for it. The ministry classes included qualified members selected to carry Muhammad's teachings. The instructors focused on speech-making techniques, argumentative theological messages, a whole set of racial jargon, and crowd-provoking socio-economic and quasi-religious issues that befitted the Nation's ideological setup. The format outweighed the substance, for a good minister was judged not by what he says but on how he says it. The body motions and strategic speech pauses mattered a great deal. Again, the ideal spokesman and teacher who excelled in effective rhetoric was Malcolm X.

Under the overall supervision of their venerated leader, the "Honorable" Elijah Muhammad, the Muslim converts were also taught the Islamic notion of moral rectitude. They were to refrain from the so-called whites' diseases such as consuming alcoholic drinks, smoking, and engaging in pre- and extra-marital relations. They were told that such activities diminished their potential to be good workers and responsible parents. The puritanical rigor in the converts' ethical behavior was laudable especially when compared to the immoral past of some members. In his study of the Black Muslim movement, Lawrence Mamiya used a Weberian approach inspired from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where a dialectical relationship between religious ideas and socio-economic conditions was established, and commented that the Black Muslims "ethic and morality have produced the changing of a predominantly lower class movement into a middle class one."¹³²

¹³² Lawrence Mamiya, "From Black Muslims to Bilalians: The Evolution of a Movement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 21 (1982), 138.

After completing his training, Imam Hassan was appointed as the minister of an unnumbered temple in New Haven, Connecticut in 1962.⁽³³⁾ Five years later, the temple became No. 40 and Imam Hassan was given the ministry of a second temple, Temple No. 41 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He taught his congregation basic skills of moral and physical cleanliness as well as elementary skills in business management. He encouraged financial independence, even if it meant doing menial and/or non-remunerative jobs, such as selling the Nation's official newspaper *Mohammad Speaks*.⁽³⁴⁾

The nation's program also included a strong economic plan based on the same underlying philosophy of separatism from White institutions. The motto was "to sell and buy black" because complete freedom from White control cannot be achieved without economic freedom. Thus, through economic self-sufficiency, their dream of creating a nation within a nation would be realized. In Chicago alone, the Nation's business enterprises included "four Supermarket Shabbaz Grocery, Chicago Lamb Packers, Good Foods, Inc., Shabbaz Bakery, Shabbaz Restaurant, Shabbaz Barber, a clothing factory, and *Mohammad Speaks*."⁽³⁵⁾

By and large, Imam Hassan was very successful in his new tasks as a minister. He was able to "fish" as he called the action of recruiting, to influence, uplift and rehabilitate many depressed converts. The Nation's message which every minister reiterated was that all the recruits "were lost but now they are found," and they shall be taught about their "past, present, and future," that they are "the chosen people," and that "we are here to save you before the world is destroyed."⁽³⁶⁾

Hassan's efforts did not go unnoticed, and in 1971, Elijah assigned him to Temple No. 27 on Broadway Avenue in Los Angeles. The previous minister, Bechir Mahmoud, had been removed from his duties for violating one of the Nation's restrictions. The temple was relocated on Central Avenue in 1973. For four years and up to Elijah's death, Minister Hassan concentrated not so much on spiritual teachings but on spurring, encouraging, and supporting black-owned private businesses. He followed a hands-on approach. Through the temple, he taught the basic know-how, conducted fund-raising events, and provided the necessary business connections. The Black Muslim community in Los Angeles of that time owned and operated a dry cleaning store, a bakery plant and three bakery outlets which became known for their famous bean pie sold all over California. They also owned one gasoline station, one supermarket, six fast food restaurants and take-outs, four fish and poultry stores, one wholesale distributor

⁽³³⁾ In Elijah's criteria, a numbered temple must have 25 converts who attend two to three meetings a week. In 1955, there were only 10 numbered temples scattered in major American cities.

⁽³⁴⁾ It was typical for the unemployed new converts in the 1950s and 1960s to start in the Nation by selling also other newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

⁽³⁵⁾ "The Nation of Islam," *African Mirror*, 46.

⁽³⁶⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 9, 1984.

company of sugar, flour and beans. They also owned a trailer-truck, a freezer-truck, and six poultry vans. From Peru, they received ten million pounds of fish which were transported in a Peruvian ship flying the Nation's star and crescent flag. These successful Black businesses solved the unemployment problem of many Black Americans for a long while. Hassan's efforts and achievements were acknowledged even by people outside the organization. He received several awards at the state and national levels for the success of these business enterprises. One award was given to him by the National Association of Market Developers; another award came from Congresswoman Yvonne Brathwaite; and a third from city Councilman Robert Farrell.

Economic gains went hand in hand with ethical business practices in the Nation's private programs. Up until Elijah's death in 1975, the Nation of Islam prioritized programs that focused on private business endeavors and encouraged its members to pioneer in any economic activity provided it be morally acceptable. The ethical and economic imprint which pervaded the Nation's philosophy appealed to Hassan who found common sense and practicality when he reached self betterment. Many members whose conspicuous pasts rendered them socially and economically unproductive found in the new organization reason to start their lives from scratch with a ready mind and attitude to improve themselves from the most menial jobs to respected positions of responsibility. Hassan may be considered a role model to be adopted by the future recruits.

Turn to Mainstream Islam

Nevertheless, Hassan's practices "à la Elijah" were to be shaken to their roots in 1975 when Wareth Deen Muhammad, Elijah's son succeeded his father at the head of the Nation of Islam. Wareth Deen sought to institute a brand new blueprint that radically cut away from his father's original design. His aim was to redirect Black Muslims towards orthodox Islam.

Although Wareth Deen Mohammad read Arabic and studied the Quran and the Hadith (Prophet Mohammad's sayings) properly, it was his brother, Akbar, who was more knowledgeable and fluent in Arabic and Islamic studies as a graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo. But it was Elijah's U.S. educated son who proceeded to remove all the labels associated with the former Nation of Islam that were mostly un-Islamic and racially segregationist. Since the economic programs were suitable in mainstream America, he rather urged the members to cooperate and seek business deals with Whites and other non-Muslims. The essence of the new direction was to soften the racial rhetoric and to follow universal Islamic principles very closely. Wareth Deen brought daring changes in the format and content of the Nation of Islam. He, for example, disbanded the FOI and its female counterpart, the MGT/GCC (Muslim Girls' Training and General Civilization Class). He destroyed the bureaucratic ministerial hierarchy and

replaced it by a council of imams. These structural changes were undertaken in a spirit of democratization. The organization no longer had a militaristic stance. Businesses that were under the control of the Nation of Islam were passed on to other Americans regardless of their color. Quotas on the sale of the newspapers were abolished. Wearing the imposed uniforms was no longer required. Most important of all, the new leader opened membership to whites and changed the name of the former Nation of Islam to the World Community of Islam in the West in 1976, a nomenclature which was again changed to the American Muslim Mission in 1980. The converts were then called "Bilalians" after Bilal Ibn Rabah, a former East African slave and a companion of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The adjective symbolized and epitomized the non-racist spirit of Islam. Temples were designated as mosques, masjids, or Muslims centers. *Mohammad Speaks* was retitled *Bilalian News* in 1976, and the *American Muslim Journal* the (*A.M. Journal*) in 1989. The popular myths of Yacub, Shabbaz and Armageddon were abandoned. Other changes included the facing of "Qibla" (direction of Mecca) for the five prayers of the day, fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan, as opposed to the unstructured direction, number, and order of prayers and fasting days during Elijah's pseudo-Islamic era.

Hassan, however, like many other members faithful to Elijah was shocked by these changes. Louis Farrakhan, the top spokesman in the Nation of Islam after Malcolm X, later quit Wareth Deen's new organization in utter dismay. He wanted nothing less than to recreate the Nation of Islam on his own and preach exactly Elijah's old messages. Farrakhan succeeded in re-establishing the old movement and many followed him. But, despite his perplexity, Hassan chose not to quit. Recalling the sudden changes, he expressed:

Wareth Deen's changes were shocking at the time because we were still under the influence of Elijah's teachings. We couldn't change overnight after 19 years of an established system. We had to grow out of the old habits. The eliminating of the FOB, taking away our uniforms, praying in prostration, fasting for thirty days were momentous shocks. Another example, in the temple then, we used to have a big board which had the sentence "UP YOU MIGHTY RACE, YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH WHAT YOU WILL" right in the center of the board. On the left side, there was a picture of a man hanged on a cross under the American flag, which represented slavery and death. On the right side there was a Muslim flag with a star and a crescent, which represented freedom, justice and equality. The question was "WHICH ONE WILL SURVIVE THE WAR OR ARMAGEDDON?" It was so symbolic for the new converts but Wareth Deen Mohammad called it "old and archaic" and took it off. It took me a while (months) to understand Wareth's purpose... He wanted to bring us in line with universal Islam and to free us from the militant posture.⁽³⁷⁾

Hassan's gradual shift from allegiance to the old reformer and Black nationalist, Elijah Mohammad, and towards an acceptance of the new moral reformer and universal

⁽³⁷⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 18, 1984.

Islamist Mujedded (one who renews) Wareth Deen Muhammad was greatly assisted by an extensive research in Islamic teachings. A thorough study of the explanation of the Quran proper confirmed to him the wisdom of Wareth's move to orthodox Islam. The precepts delineated in the Holy Book and his discovery of one particular verse in the Quran helped him reach a full understanding of his new Islamic direction. In Sura 44, Allah says:

And we appointed the Qibla
Only to test those who followed the apostle
From those who would turn on their heels
(from the faith).⁽³⁸⁾

After reading that Surah, Hassan was able to rid himself of false beliefs and his guilt for having betrayed the teachings of Elijah. Explaining his turn-about from Elijah to Wareth, he related:

I looked at his Quranic verse as applying to Wareth Deen who turned us from Farad to a universal God, and from Elijah to Mohammad, (Peace Be Upon Him), the real Prophet of Islam. This Surah made me aware of my responsibilities as an Imam today. I don't believe in a man as God. I don't have the picture of Farad as God in my mind, nor that of Elijah as a Prophet. I know I am facing the right direction.⁽³⁹⁾

The Quran further offered him solutions to his unsolved religious questions untackled under Elijah. Surah *al-Baqara*, for instance, the longest one in the Quran, summed up for him the essence of the Quran. He learned in detail the chronological history of the three main prophets sent by God: Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Of great importance was the story of Abraham and his son Ismail. They built the Kaaba (Shrine of Mecca) to be the symbol of unity of all Moslems. God's nature is revealed in the verse of the throne. *Ayat al-Kursi*, which sets God apart from any human limitations and foibles and whose eternal life is not limited to space and time. The verse goes:

God, there is no God
But He – the Living,
The Self-Subsisting, Eternal,
No slumber can seize him
Nor Sleep. His are all things.
In the heavens and on earth ...
Who is there can intercede
In His presence except as He permitted? He knoweth
What (appearth to His creatures As)
Before or After
Or Behind them.
Nor shall compass
Aught of His Knowledge

⁽³⁸⁾ *The Holy Quran*, Surah 11, Verse 143.

⁽³⁹⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 18, 1984.

Except as He willeth
 His throne doth extend
 Over the heavens
 And the earth, and He feeleth
 No fatigue in guarding
 And preserving them
 For he is the Most High
 The Supreme (in glory)⁽⁴⁰⁾

The sobering explanations in the Quran helped Hassan to soften his former angry rhetoric. In fact, he was following the instructions of the new leader whose Islamic education preceded and was superior to his. Hassan felt committed to the new leader because it was clear to him that the new reformer's plan made more sense than that of Louis Farrakhan of whose cause he had tasted. Moreover, his maturity and knowledge outweighed by far Farrakhan's young followers, most of whom were "street dudes."⁽⁴¹⁾ His reduced physical energy was perhaps another factor that convinced him to hit the books rather than the streets. Speaking about Wareth's followers after the split in the movement, he commented:

Racial and harsh rhetoric against Whites is not needed anymore. Well, it took us to do demonstrations, to shock them to look at themselves and at us. The honorable Elijah Muhammad gave the Whites the biggest shock when he called them a race of devils. He condemned the religion of Christianity all together. He once said "you can wring Christianity out like a wet dish rag. Every drop would spell slavery." Out eyes are opened now. We educated ourselves and we know that human reactions are the same among any race, so we know how to deal with them progressively and intellectually. Overt demonstration and publicity brought immediate response like the case of starvation in Ethiopia. A lot of Whites did not know or preferred to put it under the carpet. Once we began to put our problems in their consciousness, they could not rest. The question now is to re-educate African American Muslims into a healthy kind of religion, free from racism, hatred, and fatalism.⁽⁴²⁾

Under Wareth Deen Mohammad, Hassan changed his title from Minister to Imam, and because of his genuine commitment to the understanding of Islam straight from the Quran as the ultimate source, he was able to attract additional members to the mosque he was running. Masjid Felix Bilal, ex-Temple No. 27, had a congregation of approximately one thousand Moslems. It was then the biggest in Los Angeles, and from which several branches sprang in the adjoining parts of the Greater Los Angeles area. Various activities for the benefit of the surrounding black community and the Watts area, where the majority of the poorest urban Blacks lived, continued to be held at Masjid Felix Bilal under the supervision of Imam Hassan. As a religious leader, he focused now more on the Friday prayer which included two "khotbas" or sermons. In

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *The Holy Quran*, Surah 2, Verse 255.

⁽⁴¹⁾ "When Muslims Talk, Street Dudes Listen," *Washington Post*, 106 (June 8, 1983), DC1.

⁽⁴²⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 20, 1984.

the *American Muslim Journal*, the definition of an Imam was given clearly and Imams all over the United States abided by the new directives.

An Imam is not only to lead the people in prayer but he is in fact a leader of the local community. His khotbas must have ethical tone... He is a civil rights, a human rights, and a religious activist. He is Muslim, i.e. a slave to Allah.⁽⁴³⁾

In addition, Imam Hassan supervised Quranic lessons called "Taalim," or teaching religious classes, on Sundays. He also officiated at weddings and funeral services, and organized fund raising activities with a strong Islamic overtone. One new activity Imam Hassan emphasized was the improvement of relationships between Moslems and non-Moslems. Religious and ethnic open-mindedness is a key quality in the American context and Imam Hassan possessed it. His outstanding performance as an open-minded religious leader in Los Angeles has attracted the attention of scholars and religious leaders of different denominations. Together with Christian priests and Jewish rabbis, they often debated universal religious and humanistic aspects and sought to bring solutions to common educational and administrative problems for their respective congregations. Imam Hassan carried on this dialogue with laymen with whom he interacted in his business endeavors.

As part time president of a real estate development company, Imam Hassan's efficient work and honest interaction with his co-workers and clientele boosted the number of his friends and customers who, he claimed, kept "long-lasting and trustworthy relationships" with him. Stressing a Weberian work ethic philosophy to explain the rigor in Moslem personal behavior and social attitudes. Hassan stated:

My religion governs my business behavior. In my real estate business, I abide by the rules of Al-Islam which stress heavily upon honesty and fair altruistic dealings. I cannot act contrary to the dictation of my religion. I must be fair and just. I can't misguide or deceive anyone. As a matter of fact, the real estate commissioner has set rules you think they were written by a good Muslim. I cannot hide any material information that can affect the customer's decision to buy or not to buy; and that makes me a reliable person. Customers will respect you for your honesty. The truth of the matter is that they'd rather deal with a good Muslim rather than with a good Christian. They prefer a Muslim and they know that a Muslim's behavior is reflected in his everyday conduct.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Even before Wareth Deen acceded to leadership, hard work and a strict moral code were enforced under Elijah. Thrift and saving were championed. Spending and indulging in materialistic excesses were frowned upon. Even meals were reduced to one a day. In short, they lived a puritanical life rare even in other Moslem countries. The new leader who insisted on their going by the book, in this case the Holy Book of the Quran, found the majority – roughly one million – ready for a new blueprint.

⁽⁴³⁾ *The American Muslim Journal*, October 19, 1984.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, December 7, 1984.

This turn into mainstream Islam was paired with a turn into mainstream America. Black Moslems were encouraged to mix with whites, to vote, to utter the pledge of allegiance, and to enroll in the armed forces.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The negative stigma attached to the old organization and the notoriety of its members soon gave way to cautious bilateral acceptance that black and white Americans strongly desired. Imam Hassan was among the first enthusiasts to welcome this turn to mainstream America. In 1985, when he and other mosque authorities planned to tear down Masjid Felix Bilal, they projected to construct a new building which would include a new mosque, a school, and several stores for shopping conveniences. Reflecting on the new school, Imam Hassan said:

When we build the new school, we are going to fly the American flag along with the Muslim one... Yes, we will teach our children the pledge of allegiance and the national anthem. We are Americans and we abide by the rules of the American government. We will only eliminate the things that contradict with our religion such as Christian holidays and the aforementioned social diseases. We will teach English and Arabic; Arabic because it is the language of the Quran. If the Quran was revealed in another language, we would learn that particular language... We don't import Arabs' customs, we follow our American environment in everything, save Quranic injunctions.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The dual redirection of the Muslim movement to mainstream America and mainstream Islam was considered by many a blessing in disguise, for many Muslims were weary of the old militant stance and were fairly knowledgeable in orthodox Islam, the language of which transcends racial considerations. Wareth Deen Muhammad, the new leader, realized that his father's radical movement would only lead them to more conflicts inside and outside America. His father's personal concoction of the movement's ideology only attracted the ire of the American government which kept a black list on the members of the movement and pestered them constantly. Furthermore, the Black Muslims were able to learn from other non-American Moslems that their "brand" of Islam lacked the stamp of authenticity. It was therefore incumbent upon the new leader, whose symbolic name translated literally as "the inheritor of religion," to expedite corrective measures for the benefit of his people. People like Imam Hassan, who were initially shocked by the uprooting of the old values, soon became convinced of the new direction of the movement. A Black Muslim today can live comfortably with his religious beliefs both in the USA and in Moslem countries. Imam Hassan proudly acknowledges the fact that:

Today, being a Moslem is an asset. There used to be a time where revealing who you were was a liability. Today, many Americans know that a Muslim is morally good and hard

⁽⁴⁵⁾ James Emerson Whitehurst, "Black Muslims: Healing the Hate," *Christian Century*, 97 (February 27, 1980), 2.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 15, 1984. See also Oliver Jones, Jr., "The Black Muslim Movement and the American Constitutional System," *Journal of Black Studies*, 13, No. 4 (1983), 417-38.

working because he studies before he confronts anything. Now, a scab can be found here and there; but on the whole, I'd say 99% of Muslims are trustworthy.⁽⁴⁷⁾

In one important sense, the ideological overtones of the Black Muslims were in sum the recapitulative essence of all other historical Black leaders of the twentieth century. Without necessarily acknowledging it, Black Muslims practiced in fact Booker T. Washington's leitmotif "pull-yourself-by-the-straps-of-your-boots-through-hard-work." Many new recruits upscaled themselves through independent and small economic programs. Equally important was W.E.B. Du Bois' emphasis on education. Although the Duboisian ideal was meant for an intellectual elite, the "talented tenth" in Du Bois' words, the Black Muslims sought to achieve that idea.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The rhetoric of racial glory and pride used by Marcus Garvey finds echoes in Malcolm X's fiery speeches. It is true that the Black Muslims often had recourse to a violent rhetoric, but like Martin Luther King, Jr. They too, to a certain extent, adhered to the principles of non-violence (unless they were attacked). They were more often than not more law-abiding and ethically upright than any other minority group. Imam Hassan summed it up:

The movement was designed to instill self-esteem in depressed and oppressed people. And it succeeded. We were taught to rely on ourselves, to acquire education, to develop our basic God-given talent, to go into business, to pull our resources and produce something. There was nothing wrong with that kind of teaching: what was wrong was the religious part.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Imam Hassan's opinion sums up the predominant thinking among the leadership. The impression is that the movement had achieved its social and economic objectives; and it was now high time to take care of the religious aspect. The pendulum has swung in the direction of religion following Wareth Deen Mohammad's institution of the genuine Islamic concepts and practices in 1975. The Black Muslims were taught properly the five pillars of Islam. Many converts, however, including Imam Hassan, had difficulties following the new practices. Because of the lack of facilities to perform ablutions and to pray in prostration in work places, Imam Hassan like many others found it inevitable to group the prayers at a later time. On the other hand, fasting from sunrise to sunset for a month every year did not seem to bother most converts. Reflecting on fasting, Imam Hassan said:

Islam goes well with my everyday life. During the fasting or Ramadan, be it in winter or in summer, we work from sunrise to sunset without a bite or a sip of water. We do not take

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, December 7, 1984.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ For the concept of intellectual performance among Blacks, see Ali A. Mazru, "Negritude, the Talmudic Tradition and the Intellectual Performance of Blacks and Jews," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1 (1978), 19-36; Lawrence Crouchet, "Early Black Studies Movements," *Journal of Black Studies*, 2 (1971), 189-200.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 10, 1984.

naps like it is the practice in the Moslem countries. This shows a confirmed faith and Muslims do it without complaints.⁽⁵⁰⁾

With regards to the American environment, Hassan was aware that Islamic teachings and practices never conflicted with the existing secular system. He was even grateful that a democratic system allowed them to pursue their religious faith. It took him years though to realize this simple truth and speak positively about the American constitution and its Bill of Rights. Switching to mainstream Islam seemed to coincide with the adoption of the bourgeois values of Middle Class America. Speaking about the U.S. Constitution, he exclaimed:

The Constitution allows us freedom of speech and religion. You don't have this privilege anywhere in the world, and that I cherish very much. If our Constitution was dictatorial, I would have never heard of Islam in this country and would not have been a Muslim today. It was an individual choice, my choice. The religion was not imposed on me. We are thankful to Allah for such freedom in America and we know it's the doing of Allah that some place on this earth could be set up where if you are not happy anywhere there you can choose another place. The other advantage is that I have the freedom to chose the type of education I want. No one dictates to me the kind of education you must have. It's a free country. I can also enlist in the army if I want to. The draft duty should be felt as an obligation. If you don't do it, they won't shoot you for refusal, you can chose to go to jail. . . . After I traveled to Asia and Europe, I realized my country is the best. It is the most progressive country on earth. It is a highly competitive country but Islam teaches to be competitive. In Surah *Jum'ah*, Allah said: "Come to Friday prayer and then vie to seek Allah's bounty." Islam believes in free enterprises. It is only against the concentration of wealth and hoarding that are "Haram" (sinful). If you are hardworking enough to lead 10 businesses at the same time, May Allah Bless you. Use the surplus in charity to help the needy.⁽⁵¹⁾

The story of Imam Hassan is not unique. Several Black Muslims who chose to align themselves with the mainstreamist Wareth Deen Mohammed have experienced similar emotions and actions. The inward and outward behavioral changes of many converts tended to place them, in the long run, in a more favorable position within American secular society than they initially were when they opted for separatism. Of course, the split in the movement in the late 1970s led to the recreation of the old movement, viz. Elijah's, through Farrakhan, and the creation of new ones, one of which is the revivalism of Noble Drew Ali's Moorish movement. The Ansar Cult in America whose move away from orthodox Islam is another case in point of the multiple Black American nationalists who are still searching today for distinctly revolutionary and imported ideologies that can help them keep their sanity in a racist social system.⁽⁵²⁾ The

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 5, 1984.

⁽⁵¹⁾ Author's interview with Imam Hassan, November 5, 1984.

⁽⁵²⁾ In "Social Structure and Social Movements: The Black Muslims in the U.S.A. and Ras-Tafarians in Jamaica," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 24, No. 2 (June 1973), 188-204; Watson G. Llewellyn found the two groups "remarkably similar" and argued that "which possessed Muslims and Ras-Tafarians is not a demon but the social system of which they are a part." See also Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *The Ansar Cult in America* (Riyadh: Tawheed Publications, 1988).

mushrooming marginal movements further reflect the many inequities still existing in America, a country which most ethnic minorities love to hate its shortcomings and hate to love its alluring sides.