

AMES 295S / AAAS 295 / ICS 212 / GSF 296S / REL 295S
Black Muslims (150 minutes)
Professor Ellen McLarney
Rubenstein Library, 1st Floor Classroom

Module title: Recovering Black Muslim Experiences

(Students will be divided into 4 groups)

Part one: Reading against the grain

10 minutes Introduction
40 minutes Review of sources and small group discussion
20 minutes Reporting on sources and discussion

****10-minute break****

Part two: Self-Fashioning techniques in a Muslim counter-public

10 minutes Introduction
40 minutes Review of sources and small group discussion
20 minutes Reporting on sources and discussion

Note: This module was designed for a 2.5-hour class that meets once a week. The module is divided into two parts, in which students work with distinct sets of documents. These parts can be taught either in a single class period, with each session separated by a 10-minute break, or it can be divided over 2 class periods, with 1-1.5 hours allocated for each session.

Background readings

Students engaging in this module will have read the following books from the course syllabus:

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

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

Malcolm X and Alex Haley. 1987. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Using archival materials, including newspaper accounts and counter-intelligence documents, students will piece together narratives of black Muslim experience in the 20th century. Given the hostile nature of the sources, which variously construe the black Muslim subject as criminal, uncivilized, or an enemy of the nation, students will consider how they, as historians, might perform a recuperative reading of these documents. How can we obtain a neutral or even sympathetic account of an historical figure from within the racist or Islamophobic discourse in

which the narrative is situated? How can we read against the grain of sensationalistic or criminalizing texts that apprehend the black Muslim subject as a threat to civilizational progress or national security? We will also consider how the categories of race, religion, and citizenship become fungible and interpenetrated as they are used by the state for the discipline and control of minority subjects.

Learning outcomes:

1. Introduce students to methodological approaches to primary sources.
2. Orient students to the skills they need to understand, extract, and interpret information presented in a variety of primary sources. This includes taking note of the materiality of the document, as well as attending to their formal aspects, such as watermarks, stamps, set-form categories, letterheads, etc. Push students to imagine what can be deduced about the life of the document, as well as the assumptions of the bureaucracy that produced it, from these formal elements.
3. Encourage students to consider the ethics of writing subaltern histories. Train them to read for bias in historical sources, and to interpret documents by reading “against the grain.”
4. Reflect on the historical instability of racial categories and identify the ways that race intersects and with the domain of religion and concepts of national belonging.
5. Introduce students to the concept of self-fashioning. Students will identify how religious disciplinary techniques, such as fasting, have been adapted by communities like the Nation of Islam to fashion a new African American subject.

Part One: Reading Against the Grain

After a brief introduction to Archives and Special Collections, the session facilitator will introduce the concept of “reading against the grain” as a method for writing histories of subaltern communities. It might be useful to present from the white board, writing this term as well as “subaltern” on the board and define both for the class. In the reading selections students completed prior to class, historian Edward E. Curtis IV candidly discusses the problem of obtaining reliable information on early Muslim groups in the US, where the main available sources of information are oral histories and government surveillance documents. Elicit student observations about these challenges based on Curtis’s discussion in the readings. Ask: if they were in the historian’s shoes, with what forms of bias would they have to contend when using either oral history or surveillance sources? Oral histories taken from community members tend to slip into hagiography, taking for granted the empirical truth of a religious leader’s own origin story. Surveillance documents, on the other hand, present data that fits into categories of criminality, and often reflect significant misunderstandings of religious discourse and practice. Stress the importance of gathering corroborating data to confirm the veracity of information culled from either of these sources.

After this warm-up discussion, students will be asked to divide into 4 groups (approximately 4 students per group). A small selection of primary sources that pertain to a particular individual or organization will have been distributed to each group’s table prior to the lesson. Distribute the first handout (“Reading Against the Grain”). Students will evaluate and discuss the

materials within their group, before reporting back to the class on the narrative threads they were able to decipher. Encourage students to spend time examining and discussing the formal elements of the bureaucratic documents—what they can glean from stamps, letterheads, dates, and categories imposed by the document—before moving on to examine the textual content itself.

Group 1: Dusé Muhammad Ali

Sources

- Photo of Dusé Muhammad Ali in moustache and a fez. (“Dusé Muhammad Ali” folder, Robert A. Hill Collection, Box CA 49).
- British intelligence document discussing the involvement of Dusé in what is described as a fraudulent Muslim charity scheme. In this document, Dusé is reported to be “capable of political mischief in the event of substantial sums collected for an ostensibly charitable purpose being at his disposal.” (“Dusé Muhammad Ali” folder, Robert A. Hill collection, box RE 70).
- Prospectus for the incorporation of a joint-stock company to publish “The African Times and Orient Review,” a journal edited by Dusé. The prospectus describes the journal as founded “with the object of laying the aims, desires and intentions of the Darker Races of Mankind—within and without the Empire—before the Anglo-Saxon reader and at the throne of the British Empire, with the avowed intention of promoting peace and goodwill between the Darker and Lighter Races of the World, to stem the tide of misrepresentation and to establish a more complete understanding between these human elements unfortunately hitherto opposed.” (“Dusé Muhammad Ali” folder, Robert A. Hill collection, Box RE 70).

Group 2: Moorish Science Temple (documents on the “Moorish American Consul” mix-up)

Sources

- Report by “Special Agent Willard” on the Moorish Science Temple. Describes the issuance of a false passport to Mrs. Evelyn Roberts-Bey, who based her claim to US citizenship to an application to the Moorish Science Temple. According to this letter, the Temple was informing “Moorish people” (defined in the letter as “Negroes”) that they lost their rights and privileges in the US due to the repeal of the 14th and 15th Amendments, and the only way to restore those rights was to apply for membership in the Temple. (“Moorish Science Temple / Noble Drew Ali,” Box AM 10, Robert A. Hill collection).
- A correspondence exchange between various representatives of the Near Eastern division of the US Secretary of State concerning the Grand Sheik F. Turner El of the Moorish American Consul in Brooklyn, NY. The correspondence reflects confusion over the use of the term “Consul” in the letterhead and other tokens relating to the Grand Sheik’s office. Employees of the Secretary of State ask that the Grand Sheik cease and desist in his use of this term, since it gives the impression that he is a representative of the state. There is an interesting discussion at the end of the exchange concerning the

disambiguation between “consul,” “counsel,” and “council,” where Turner El asks to retain the title, since apparently he had been offering assistance to black persons “who suffer handicaps from time to time in the pursuit of their daily lives because of their color” and “it was in connection with these civil affairs that Turner, in his work, has felt the need of some form of civil status or authority.”

(“Moorish American Consul 1934-38” folder, Box RE 61, Robert A. Hill collection).

Group 3: Moorish Science Temple (“sacrifice” reports)

Sources

- A series of photocopied articles from the *Chicago Defender* (Nov.-Dec. 1932) concerning the “human-sacrifice” committed by Robert Harris, described in the paper as the “self-crowned ‘king’ of a weird religious cult colony.” Among this series of sensationalistic articles (which, it should be noted, are all published in an African American newspaper), there is a 2-page spread that describes the Moorish Science Temple, of which Robert Harris led a branch in Detroit, as a “voodoo cult” having its “beginnings in Africa” which “still makes use of human sacrifice.”
(“Moorish Science Temple / Islam” folder, Box RE 43, Robert A. Hill collection).
- A series of typed letters to the editor signed Elijah Karriem, Elijah Muhammed, and W.D. Farad. None of them are addressed to the *Chicago Defender* per se (most are addressed to the *Baltimore Afro-American*), but they take the newspapers in question to task for drawing a connection between Islam and the murder committed by Robert Harris or voodoo.
(“Moorish Science Temple / Islam” folder, Box RE 43, Robert A. Hill collection)

Group 4: Elijah Mohammed / Nation of Islam

Sources

- Criminal docket for Elijah Mohammed listing all of his aliases (Elijah Poole, Gulam Bogans, and Mohammed Rassoull).
(Robert A. Hill collection, Box OW 2)
- FBI documents regarding Gulam Bogans’s arrest on sedition charges. Describes in detail how Bogans refused military service for all African Americans, based on the racialized claim that Moors (Muslims / African Americans) are an “Asiatic race” and should therefore side with the Japanese in WWII. Also describes belief in a Japanese mothership which will destroy the white race.
(Robert A. Hill collection, Box OW 2).

Note: The Robert A. Hill collection contains a vast number of FBI surveillance documents relating to the Nation of Islam. The documents tend to be repetitive, so much of the same information gets reiterated through the boxes. However, the facilitator is advised to browse through these files prior to class, in order to hone in on a particular issue. Additional FBI sources on the NOI may be found in RE 163, OW 19, RE 104.

Questions for discussion (included in handout):

1. What agency or organization created this document? Why—what is the purpose of the document?
2. How does the category of race appear in this collection? What explicit terms of race are used? How is race identified or “known” (i.e. physical characteristics, genealogical descent, clothing, etc.)? Do you see any evidence of overlap between categories of race, nationality, and religion?
3. What kind of transnational connections do you see emerging for the personality or organization in question? Why do these connections become a source of anxiety for those who created the document? What specifically is the fear being expressed?
4. What can we deduce about the quality of citizenship for black Muslims from these documents?
5. Imagine that you are an historian trying to reconstruct a narrative on the basis of these sources. What story do these documents allow you to tell? Would it be possible to use these sources to tell a different story about the organization or personality at the center of your collection? What steps would you take to control for bias and read your collection against the grain?
6. What gaps remain in the narrative that emerges from the sources? What other kinds of information would you need to flesh out your narrative? How do you think this information could be obtained?

Part Two: Self-Fashioning techniques in a Muslim counter-public

Begin by introducing the idea of a public / counter-public to the students. Some touchstones for this discussion might be the work of Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, or Charles Hirschkind. Discuss the difficulties of asserting a dignified subjectivity for African Americans in the mid-twentieth century, who are faced with a hegemonic public sphere where the dominant image of blackness that circulates is overwhelmingly negative, degraded, and tied to the past of slavery. Lead students in a small discussion of how self-fashioning techniques within Islam were adopted and adapted by black Muslims in the United States to create a new black identity and body. Encourage students to draw on evidence from their readings to discuss these forms of self-fashioning, focusing in particular on *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Next, distribute the second handout (“Self-fashioning Techniques in a Muslim Counter-Public”) to guide students’ engagement with the second set of documents. Documents will have been distributed to the four tables during the 10-minute break.

Sources

Documents for second half of class will come from a single archival source:

Box 1, Nation of Islam Muhammad’s Temple records, 1972-2003.

This box contains 4 folders. One folder can be distributed to each of the four groups. The folders contain orientation information for new recruits to the NOI, sermons and lecture, or training material for the Nation’s all-male paramilitary group, the Fruit of Islam (FOI).

The four folders are titled as follows:

1. Great Messenger newsletter, 1973-4
2. FOI Training Messages, 1972-1974
3. Sermons, sayings, undated
4. Temple orientation packet

The box also contains a group photo of the Fruit of Islam which speaks well to the themes of discipline / obedience / submission that run throughout the training literature. This should also be set up for display on a side table. Give students a chance to view it, either before or after discussion.

Questions for discussion (included in handout):

1. Who do you think is the target reader for your document? To whom is the document addressed?
2. What is the core lesson (or lessons) that your document wishes to impart? Through what technique(s) does it impart that lesson? If the technique belongs to the established repertoire of rules for worship and comportment in Islam (broadly speaking), are there any ways the technique is being re-fashioned for the Nation of Islam?
3. Is the lesson primarily moral / spiritual? Does it engage the body or the mind? Or, does the lesson propose an intimate connection between the spirit and the body? How is that relationship expressed?
4. What role might this document have played in fashioning a new identity for black people in the United States? How does it mobilize / interpret religious narratives or symbols in order to combat negative racialized stereotypes and assert a righteous black subject?