

A History of Islam in America

*From the New World to the
New World Order*

For

Kamala and Daryush

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Masonic orders, whose members were predominantly Christian, drew on the knowledge that was being amassed on “Oriental” and “ancient” cultures through such disciplines as archeology, ethnology, comparative religion, and philology to construct their own myths and rituals in an effort to cohere their members through a civil religion of their own. They used symbols and sayings from an imagined “mystic Orient” in order to portray their own myths and rituals as representative of “perennial truths” and “ancient wisdoms” that had withstood the test of time. In reality, however, their modern mimicry and satirizing of the ancients and the Orient were performances that on the one hand demonstrated their mastery and command over them and on the other distinguished them from their compatriots as cosmopolitan citizens with access to ancient Oriental knowledge and regalia. In the process, they superficially familiarized Americans

¹⁴⁵ Robert Dannin advances this argument in *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 22–25. However, he pushes the dichotomy between the church and such fraternities too far, ignoring the fact that many African American church leaders were also involved in organizing and leading fraternal orders. See Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 243.

¹⁴⁶ Noble Drew Ali, “Moorish Leader’s Historical Message to America,” in *Moorish Literature*, 12; also in *Moorish Guide* (September 28, 1928), 2.

¹⁴⁷ On the presence of Freemasonry in the Middle East and South Asia, see Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717–1927* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2007); Hamid Algar, “An Introduction to the History of Freemasonry in Iran,” *Middle Eastern Studies* VI (1970), 276–296; and Jacob M. Landau, “Muslim Opposition to Freemasonry,” *Die Welt des Islams* 36, no. 2 (July 1996), 186–203.

with ostensibly “Oriental” and “ancient” symbols, rituals, and myths. In many ways, they had the same effect as evolutionary understandings of religions did. They allowed, at one level, the cultures and religions of “Eastern” peoples to be recognized as part of the cultural heritage of the modern world, without challenging Northern Europeans’ prominence in the modern world. On another level, they were a Trojan Horse or a stealth conduit for the entry of “Eastern” religions into American culture. It is thus not surprising that the missionary Muhammad Sadiq sent 500 letters and copies of his paper, *The Moslem Sunrise*, to Masonic lodges in hopes of converting them to the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam.¹²⁸

Out of the varying Masonic orders, the Ancient Arabic Order, Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, or Shriners, made the most blatant and extensive use of Islamic symbols, history, and wisdom. The Shrine was founded in 1870 for an elite order of Masons holding advanced degrees. In 1893, the black version of the shrine, the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order, Nobles of the Mystic Shrines, was founded, according to the order’s own historical narrative, when John George Jones, a member of Chicago’s Prince Hall Lodge No. 7, claimed to have the degrees of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles and Mystic Shrine Masonry conferred upon him at Chicago’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 by a Noble Rofelt Pasha. The Shrine, whether black or white, developed a reputation as “the playground of Masonry” well into the 1920s.¹²⁹ Shriners made playful use of Islamic regalia and symbols such as the crescent and the star and the black stone adjacent to the Kaaba in Mecca. They, who were mostly Christian, claimed to uphold Muhammad’s creed and to obey his commands and moral teachings. They put on fezzes and turbans in their revelries and concocted legends about the origins of their order that they mapped onto Islamic history in a seemingly Islamic idiom:

The Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine was instituted by the Mohammedan Kalif Alee (whose name be praised!), the cousin-german and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed (God favor and preserve him!), in the year of the Hegira 25 (A.D. 644) at Mecca, in Arabia, as an Inquisition, or Vigilance Committee, to dispense justice and execute punishment upon criminals who escaped their just deserts through the tardiness of the courts, and also to promote religious toleration among cultured men of all nations.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ “A Brief Report on the Work in America,” *Moslem Sunrise* (October 1921), 37.

¹²⁹ Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 204.

¹³⁰ George L. Root, *The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine for North America* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing [1903], 1997), 11.



FIGURE 6. Members of the Moorish Science Temple at an annual meeting. From the Digital Collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library.

The Shriners’ influence on the Moorish Science Temple could be noted not only in the garb the “Moors” donned at their meetings and “costume balls” and the names (Ali, Hakim, Mustafa) and titles they adopted (Noble, Sheiks, Bey), but also in their religious literature. The Moorish Science Temple produced catechisms and initiation procedures similar to those found in Masonic lodges.¹³¹ As I will discuss later, Drew Ali also cloaked occult religious writings used by some Masonic orders to “de-negrofy” African Americans (i.e., to disassociate them from contemporary stereotypes and stigma associated with being a “negro”) and to create a foundation myth and a national identity for members of his organization.

Furthermore, the relative affluence and respectability of black secret societies created a prestige economy in African American communities in the North where black Muslim nationalist groups vied for adherents. Elijah Muhammad, for example, said in one of his radio addresses:

¹³¹ See, for example, *History and Catechism of the Moorish Orthodox Church of America* (n.p.: Crescent Moon Press, 1986).

Never has any so-called American Negro been taught by white people to believe in Almighty God Allah and his true religion Islam. Only in higher organizations or we say Masonry, in the Masonics, there is a little teachings at the top mostly of the particular order [i.e., the Shriners] that mentions the teachings of Almighty God Allah. But you have to pay a lot of money to become a 33rd degree Mason; therefore, you are an absolute victim, as Isaiah teaches you, that you buy that which does not bring you any gain. To buy that king of teachings does not gain you the hereafter. We must have something that is pure. A Mason cannot be a good Mason unless he knows the Holy Qur'an and follows its teachings....I say, if you are a true Moslem friend, then alright, lets have it in the open and not in the secret.¹³²

It is difficult to know whether or not Noble Drew Ali or Elijah Muhammad really believed that the Masonic performances of Islamic rituals and beliefs were the same as the rituals and beliefs of professing Muslims in other parts of the world. Whatever the case, they purported that their own teachings were a means for connecting with the global Muslim community.¹³³ Masonry provided them with the structural and mythological tools through which they could create and institutionalize their own understandings of religion. In this, Masonic orders played a parallel role in the development of black Muslim nationalist movements as Theosophy did in the development of liberal Protestant understandings of religion that were put on display at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. In fact, Noble Drew Ali's *Circle Seven Koran*, as we shall see later, was a product of metaphysical and theosophical religious writings popular with Masons. "There are many things about the history of Islam in America that people would not like to hear," recalled Wali Akram, a 1925 convert to the Ahmadiyya Movement who broke away in the 1930s to found the First Cleveland Mosque, to the anthropologist Robert Dannin. "The whole thing rested on the Masonic order! There's no use beating around the bush, that's how Islam came to America."¹³⁴

THE UNIA, DUSE MOHAMED ALI AND THE RISE OF ISLAM IN BLACK AMERICA

In addition to the cultural cachet that Islam – stereotypically reduced as exotic symbols and performances – had in certain Euro- and African American cosmopolitan circles after World War I, many African

¹³² Reproduced in Elijah Muhammad, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta, GA: Secretarius, 2002), 2–3.

¹³³ Noble Drew Ali, "Moorish Leader's Historical Message to America," in *Moorish Literature*, 12; also in *Moorish Guide*, 2.

¹³⁴ Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, v–vi.

Americans, since the days of Edward Wilmot Blyden, also regarded Islam as an authentically African religion. Thus, they associated Islam with black nationalist causes, which in the early 1920s were represented most prominently in the streets of African America by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. The UNIA was founded in 1914 in Jamaica and established its first U.S. chapter in 1917 in Harlem. Its members believed that blacks would never find equality so long as they lived under the rule of white governments. They sought to establish a new world order by reclaiming Africa for blacks throughout the world.

Some of our leaders in the Negro race flatter themselves into believing that the problem of black and white America will work itself out, and that all the Negro has to do is to be humble, submissive and obedient, and everything will work out well in the "sweet bye and bye." ... The only wise thing for us as ambitious Negroes to do is to organize the world over, and build up for the race a mighty nation of our own in Africa.¹³⁵

According to Garvey, an African nation needed an African religion. Garvey did not disavow Christianity but rather sought to Africanize it:

Whilst our God has no color, yet it is human to see everything through one's own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out (late though it be) to see our God through our own spectacles. The God of Isaac and the God of Jacob let Him exist for the race that believes in the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, the One God of all ages.¹³⁶

While Garvey himself did not claim Islam for African Americans, Islam was nonetheless associated by some African Americans with his brand of African nationalism. This is evinced by Noble Drew Ali's claim that Garvey "was divinely prepared by the great God-Allah" as the forerunner "to the coming Prophet; who was to bring the true and divine Creed of Islam, and his name is Noble Drew Ali: who was prepared and sent to this earth by Allah, to teach the old time religion and the everlasting gospel to the sons of men."¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, vol. 1, ed. Amy Jacques-Garvey (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 57–58.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³⁷ Noble Drew Ali, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America* (Chicago, IL: Noble Drew Ali, 1927), 59.

Garvey's movement was influenced in part by the pan-Africanist Duse Mohamed Ali. Duse was born in 1866 in Alexandria, Egypt to an Egyptian army officer and his Sudanese wife. He was sent to England at the age of nine for his education, and went on to study history at King's College before getting involved in theater and journalism.¹³⁸ In 1912, he and John Eldred Taylor founded *The African Times and Oriental Review* (1912–1920), an influential monthly paper “devoted to the interests of the coloured races of the world.” *The African Times and Oriental Review* was mostly in English with occasional articles or letters published in Arabic. It was distributed widely throughout the world and proclaimed itself as “a Pan-Oriental, Pan-African journal at the seat of the British Empire which would lay the aims, desires, and intentions of the Black, Brown, and Yellow races – within and without the Empire – at the throne of Caesar.”¹³⁹ Duse associated with the mission of the Ahmadiyya in Britain which was led by Khwajah Kamel-ud-Din. The two often participated at events of the Central Islamic Society, and Duse published some of Kamel-ud-Din's writings in his journal.¹⁴⁰ In 1921,¹⁴¹ Duse came to the United States on a business trip. He intended to find American buyers for products (particularly cocoa) which, the Inter-Colonial Cooperation, a West African cooperative he helped establish, sought to export.¹⁴² Duse's business venture went awry, and he found himself in the position of having to start over in the United States. He spent the next ten years lecturing on issues related to Egypt and Africa throughout the United States, starting new business ventures, and promoting cultural activities related to Africa and the “Orient.” In April 1922, he became a leading functionary in Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, serving as the head of the African Affairs department.¹⁴³ This marked a turn in Duse and

¹³⁸ For an overview of Duse's life, see Ian Duffield, “Duse Mohamed Ali and the Development of Pan-Africanism 1866–1945,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1971) and Khalil Mahmud, “New Introduction,” in *In the Land of the Pharaohs*, by Duse Mohamed, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1968), ix–xxxiii. All autobiographical references to Duse's life in the following pages are from Duse Mohamed Ali, “Leaves from an Active Life, Chapter XV: American Activities” in *Comet*, February 5, 1938.

¹³⁹ “Foreward,” *African Times and Orient Review* 1, no. 1 (July 1912), 1.

¹⁴⁰ For examples, see Khwaja Kamal-ed-Din, “Cross Versus Crescent” and “Jesus, an Ideal of Godhead and Humanity,” *African Times and Orient Review* (December-January 1913), 197–198 and 217–222.

¹⁴¹ Duse himself, writing later from memory, said that he came to the United States in 1920, but Duffield has shown based on external evidence that this was unlikely. Duffield, “Duse Mohamed Ali and the Development of Pan-Africanism 1866–1945,” vol. 2, 650n1.

¹⁴² Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3–4.

¹⁴³ Duffield, “Duse Mohamed Ali,” vol. 2, 660.



FIGURE 7. Duse Mohamed Ali. From *The African Times and Orient Review* (July 1912).

Garvey's relationship, because Garvey had been an employee of Duse's journal in 1913 and was heavily influenced by the journal's pan-African ideology. Indeed, in the 1930s it was often said that “Garvey was taught by a Muslim.”¹⁴⁴ While working for Garvey, Duse contributed regularly to *The Negro World* and served as his liaison to African American leaders who deemed Garvey's ideology too radical to deal with him directly.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 86.

¹⁴⁵ Duffield, “Duse Mohamed Ali,” vol. 2, 662.

While in the United States, Duse used to wear a fez to protect himself from racism. This act seems to suggest that despite the widespread prejudice against Islam in white America, it continued to be significant as a “semi-civilizing” and thus a liminal religion for African Americans. According to one of Duse’s biographers, “There is no doubt that he was perfectly conscious that an exotic appearance, identifying a black man as *not* a black American, could give protection.”¹⁴⁶ As this suggests, black Americans’ adoption of Islamic symbols and sartorial practices helped them escape to some degree the stigma of being black in a white society. It gave them a liminal status by disassociating them from black stereotypes or “de-negrofying” them, thus allowing them to identify themselves as a new race, as “Moorish Americans” or members of “the Nation of Islam.” Testimonies by black converts to the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam (cited in Chapter 6) also confirmed the role Islam played in their lives by ascribing to them a liminal racial identity between white and black, which allowed them into white business establishment in the Jim Crow South. “Come change your name,” cried a prominent African American convert who proselytized in the streets of St. Louis for the Ahmadiyya in the 1920s, “get back your original language and religion, and you won’t be a nigger no more!” Another Ahmadiyya pamphlet produced by African American converts in Cleveland in the early 1930s, read: “Abolish Negro-ism! Nationality worries disappear! Learn the Arabic language, the language of your ancestors, which is in daily use by more than one third of the world’s population.”¹⁴⁷

Around 1921, Duse reports that some Indian Muslims whom he had met in New York asked him to come to Detroit to give a couple of lectures and to help them organize a Muslim society that would “be the means of establishing a prayer room with a regular system of weekly prayers which had been sadly neglected.” Although he does not mention who exactly invited him, given Duse’s involvement with the Ahmadiyya in London, it is very likely that his reference to “Indian Muslims” is actually to the Ahmadiyya missionary Muhammad Sadiq, who came to the United States in 1920 and was in Detroit in 1921–1922.¹⁴⁸ The Muslim society to which he refers may very well have been the above-mentioned Highland Park mosque, where Sadiq served as an imam

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 665.

¹⁴⁷ Cited in Dannin, *Pilgrimage to Islam*, 92 and 104.

¹⁴⁸ The Ahmadiyya’s paper, *The Moslem Sunrise*, carried few advertisements, but it did carry an ad for “The Vision of Duse Mohamed Ali, The Egyptian Historian, President American-African-Orient Corporation.” See *Moslem Sunrise* 3, no. 2 (April 1924), 57.

and where he began the publication of his apologetic newspaper, *The Moslem Sunrise*.¹⁴⁹ While in Detroit, Duse also founded an American Asiatic Association which aimed to “call into being more amicable relations and a better understanding between America and the Orient in general.” The Association provided him with opportunities to produce theatrical performances dealing with “the Orient” and to provide the community with lectures on “Oriental” literature, religions, societies, and politics. As a former Exalted Ruler of the Order of Elks, he was also involved with the Detroit branch of the Order.¹⁵⁰ It is likely that his involvement with fraternal orders was not limited to the Order of Elks. According to the April 1922 issue of the *Negro World* he attended gatherings of prominent Masons along with Marcus Garvey, Arthur Schomburg, and a Dr. Abdul Hamid of Khartoum, Egypt, a 96 degree Mason and a Shriner who was identified as a friend of Duse’s.¹⁵¹ Duse also associated with secret societies through his wife, Gertrude La Page; she was a white American actress and an “ardent Rosicrucian,” and he himself had a deep interest in the “mysteries and secret lore of ancient Egypt,” which he explored in some of his fictional writings.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ *Moslem Sunrise* 1, no. 1 (July 1921), 22, citing *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1921.

¹⁵⁰ Duse, “Leaves from an Active Life.”

¹⁵¹ *Negro World*, April 1922, cited in Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 95.

¹⁵² Mahmud, “New Introduction,” in *In the Land of the Pharaohs*, xxii.