The Ansaaru Allah Community

Susan J. Palmer

1 Introduction

The Ansaaru Allah Community (also known as the Ansarullah Community) was one of the African American Muslim movements to emerge out of the new, indigenous forms of Islam in America in the 1960s. This movement might best be understood within the context of America's twentieth century Black 'cultic milieu'; the esoteric 'underground' of spiritual/philosophical concepts, debating circles and private practitioners that was percolating in the rebellious salons of the major American cities (Campbell 1972). Within this eclectic milieu, various Black messianic spiritual movements took root and evolved into successful NRMS, such as the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths (McCloud 1995). Marcus Garvey's "Blackosophy" of the early 1900s (Moses 1987; Simpson 1978), and the Black Nationalist and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s also contributed to the formation of these African-American NRMS.

The Ansaaru Allah Community (AAC) was an African-American communal society that flourished in Brooklyn, NY from 1973 to 1992. 'Ansaaru Allah' refers to the 'helpers of Allāh', and the daily life of the members was centered on their mosque on Bushwick Avenue. This intentional community, which might be described as utopian, millenarian and messianic, dominated the neighborhood around Brooklyn's Bushwick Avenue for over nineteen years. The Ansaars published a newsletter, *The Nuwaubian Village Bulletin*, and hundreds of 'scrolls' (small booklets) co-authored by their messianic founder with his plural wives. These scrolls were sold in the bookstore on Bushwick Avenue and distributed in the streets of New York and other major cities by the Ansaar missionaries, known as Propagators.

On the surface the AAC appeared to be an expatriate community of African fundamental Muslims. The men wore Sudanese robes and turbans, and the women wore long white gowns and burkas. But a reading of the AAC literature indicates that the Qur'ānic verses and *aḥadīth* are intertwined with ufolgy, theosophy and New Age racist creation myths. A study of the forty-year history of this movement reveals that the founder, Dwight D. York (b. 1945), has founded not just one, but an elaborate series of at least seven spiritual

movements. Dr Malachi Z. York (as he is known by his disciples) has been creating, debriefing, renaming and reorganising his various spiritual groups since 1967. Each time a group goes underground and resurfaces under a new name, York's disciples reappear in new exotic costumes on the streets of New York and other American cities. His movement has operated under the following names: Ansaar Pure Sufi (1967); Nubian Islamic Hebrew Mission (1968); Nubian Islamic Hebrews (1969); Ansaaru Allah Community (1973–1992); Holy Tabernacle Ministries (1992); United Nuwaubian Nations of Moors (1993); and Yamassee Native American Moors of the Creek Nation (1993).

Confronted with this enigma, the obvious questions for an academic studying Dr York's volatile career would be these: "Why the dramatic divagations? What is the purpose or meaning of these radical changes in this African-American movement? What is the larger social significance?" The goal of this chapter is to try to answer these questions. Much of this study is inspired by my years of fieldwork with the Ansaaru Allah Community. My research on Dr Malachi York's movement involved several stages. In the late 1980s I began to collect the Ansaaru Allah literature that was being peddled on the streets of Montreal, Toronto and New York by the Propagators. Most of my information was gathered from intermittent participant observation in Nuwaubian meetings over a period of ten years at the group's esoteric bookstores where they hold their weekly Question & Answer sessions. These took place in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, London (UK), Atlanta, and at Tama-Re, their commune and Egyptian (sic) theme park in Georgia.

In June 2004 I participated in the 'Savior's Day' festival and pilgrimage, traveling by bus with the disciples from Brooklyn to Tama Re in Georgia. There I conducted interviews with various pilgrims and with the 'Triad' (the three top administrators at Tama Re). On another trip to Georgia I interviewed some of the group's cultural opponents, Sheriff Howard Sills, a local journalist Rob Peecher, and Jacob York, the alienated son of Dr Malachi York (a.k.a. Dwight York). I worked closely with a New York documentary filmmaker, Paul Greenhouse, who was in the process of making a film on the movement. I also did fieldwork through occasional attendance at the Sunday Question & Answer sessions held at Tents of Kedar and All Eyes on Egypt (sic) bookstores in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, London, and Atlanta.¹

It is not unusual to find rapid, startling transformations in new religions, as Robert Ellwood (1973), Roy Wallis (1984), and Eileen Barker (2013) have noted. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of a new religious movement is its instability or mercurial nature. As 'baby religions', NRMs pass through

1 For more on my fieldwork experiences with this group, see Palmer 2010.

developmental stages of rapid growth. Charismatic prophet-founders are still in the process of defining their roles and *personae*, and their revelations are still in the primitive oral phase, hence fluid. Myths, doctrines and rituals begin to unfurl as the prophet and his/her core group set in place the building blocks of a future religion. Millenarian expectations change course, and dress codes, dietary habits (and even sexual mores) will be tried on, worn out, and then discarded. In Dwight York's movement, however, these divagations are even more rapid and extreme than usual.

York's critics will offer quite different reasons from his disciples. Historians of religion might compare York's pedagogical methods to those found in gnostic currents through the European history of heresy. An additional interpretation can be found the sociology of new religions. But before exploring these interpretations, it is necessary to focus on Dwight York's career and the development of the Ansaaru Allah Community.

2 The Enigma of Dwight York's Identity

There is ample information on the internet about Dr Malachi Z. York the god, but very little data on the man, Dwight York. He was an enigmatic and complex personality, to say the least. The biographical data in this chapter is from four sources: the 1993 FBI report; *The Ansar Cult* by Bilal Philips (1988); interviews with members, ex-members and relatives; and hagiographies of York found in his books or 'scrolls'. Over forty years of directing his rapidly mutating spiritual movement, York has assumed various charismatic titles. In the days of the Ansaaru Allah Community, orthodox Sunni leaders denounced York as a '*Mahdī* pretender' who blasphemed Allāh and perverted Islam. Today, for his prison wardens, he is Inmate #17911, and serving a 135-year sentence in the 'supermax' security federal prison in Florence, Colorado—known as the 'Alcatraz of the Rockies'—on charges of child molestation and financial misconduct. Sheriff Howard Sills of Eatonton, Georgia, who assisted in the FBI's military-style raid on York's "compound" in 2002 described York as "the most heinous criminal in the history of the United States" (Palmer 2010). Journalists (predictably) tend to portray York as "cult leader" and a "con artist" who exploits the gullible members of his "black militant," "quasi-religious" sect (Osinski 2007).

His supporters, however, insist that he is an innocent man who was framed, silenced, and brought down by a conspiracy of disgruntled ex-members who colluded with the 'White Power Structure'. For his disciples, he is still their Master Teacher, the Savior, come to awaken the sleeping African Americans, to help them break the 'Spell of Kingu', to arm them with 'Right Knowledge'.

York's lawyer, Attorney Malik Zulu Shabazz of the New Black Panther Party, describes his client as "a great leader of our people ... a victim of an open conspiracy by our enemy" (Palmer 2010). Thus, one finds conflicting portraits of Dr York, but his enemies and supporters do have one thing in common: passion.

It is difficult to get a sense of Dwight York from the 450-odd booklets, authored or edited under various *noms des plumes*. The curious reader will encounter a bewildering choice of esoteric topics culled from seemingly incompatible sources, including mystical Islam, 'scientific' theories in UFO lore, American Blackosophy, Edgar Cayce's writings, US Patriot conspiracy theories, and Black Freemasonry. A better sense of Dr York may be gained from watching the man in action: by viewing his speeches filmed at his Savior's Day appearances in Georgia during the late 1990s, or in the Brooklyn mosque in the 1980s.² On film he appears as a robust middle-aged man—handsome, confident, relaxed—and his discourse is riveting. Yet he does not behave like a conventional religious leader. He does not formulate doctrines, relate parables or explain ideas in a coherent fashion. Rather, he shakes the very foundations of belief. He mocks mainstream religions and attacks orthodox doctrines, Christian, Muslim and Jewish. He plays his audience, who roars with laughter and shout out responses as he relentlessly punctures their preconceptions, challenges social conventions, and assaults their deepest conceptions of 'Reality'. "Don't believe me! Do your own research! Check it out for yourself!" is the *leitmotiv* that runs through all his discourses.

York's rhetorical style resembles other twentieth century religious and mystical teachers: George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and Marshall Herff Applewhite, to name but a few. By playful use of language, they point to the ineffable, mysterious nature of direct spiritual experience. They inspire their audiences to wake up, seize the moment, to 'become your own master'. Like these better-known spiritual teachers, Dr York's discourse is self-consciously metaphorical and filled with paradox and humor. But unlike these Caucasian spiritual teachers and Indian gurus, Dr York is a Black man who speaks to African Americans. His rhetoric is steeped in Black Nationalist ideas borrowed from Marcus Garvey, Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, Stokely Carmichael, and the other inspirational, revolutionary ideologues. However, York's peculiar brand of racialism does not correspond with the 'fundamentalism' of the Nation of Islam or the political activism of the Black Panthers. Rather, it is closer to the ancient, esoteric schools of Gnosticism. Dr York has forged theories and myths of race, not to build a church or to bring about a social revolution, but rather to function as

2 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb9SkJypVi4>. Accessed 25/09/2018.

pedagogical devices to awaken his disciples from 'sleep'. In *Is There Eternal Life After Death?* (York n.d.) one of his more succinct statements, he declares his mission as follows: "I have devoted my visit to this planet to the resurrection of the mentally dead, which I affectionately refer to as 'mummies'."

For future historians studying the "alternative altars" (Ellwood 1979) of Black History in America, Dwight York will occupy an important place in its gallery of messiahs, prophets, philosophers and social activists. Each leader proposed creative practical solutions to the socio-economic problems of his or her people. Many forged their own original theodicies, in trying to make sense of a people's four hundred years of suffering since the slave trade came to the Americas. The result has been to imbue the African American experience with an uplifting moral and spiritual significance, and Dwight York is acutely conscious of his place in this gallery. He recreates the ongoing narrative of the Black Jeremiad in America (Pitney 2005) in such a way as to reinforce his own charismatic claims. In *The Holy Tablets* this becomes quite apparent:

But they all knew a savior was coming. Some thought it was Marcus Garvey who wanted to go back to Africa. Others thought Noble Drew Ali, others thought it was Elijah Muhammad or his teacher, W.F.D. Muhammad. Others thought it was Clarence 13X, even others thought it was Martin Luther King, some said it was Rap Brown or Stokely Carmichael from the 60s. Or Eldridge Cleaver or Bobby Seale, some thought it was Ron Karenga or Leroi Jones ... Others think it is Minister Louis Farrakhan or Yahweh ben Yahweh or Ben Ammi Carter. And even others think it is themselves, and the list of saviors goes on ... from the early 1900s all the way up to 1970 A.D. when something new started happening. A teaching unlike any other started spreading.

YORK n.d.: 1640–1641

Dr York firmly plants his message within the social context of 1960s America: the race riots, the rise of the Black Panthers, and the struggle for social justice and the beginnings of Black Pride. As he explains in *The Holy Tablets* (York n.d.) "This made way for the first part of our liberation ... what I have to give would liberate the mind of the Nubian Nation and the physical will follow." York portrays himself as a spiritual seeker during the tumultuous period of Black nationalism in the 1960s in Harlem and New York, and he shows a keen interest in the 'spiritual politics' of the era. One example is the NOI's interne-cine struggles and disputes over the succession following the death of Elijah Muhammad; a situation York was quick to capitalise on. York's writings reveal

his awareness of new currents in the Black nationalist/spiritual *milieu*, as well as his ability to incorporate these currents into his movement.

Like other prophets (Master Fard, Father Divine) Dwight York's birth and origins remains shrouded in mystery. York claims he was born in the Sudan on 26 June 1945. The FBI report gives the same date, but states his birthplace was in Baltimore, Maryland. Bilal Philips (1988), an orthodox Sunni heresiologist and "countercultist" (Introvigne 1995: 32) insists that York was born in 1935, but revised his birth date in order to bolster his charismatic claim to be the great-grandson of the Sudanese *Mahdī*, whose rebirth was prophesied to occur in the West exactly one hundred years later; his point being that York wanted to fit the *ḥadīth* that proclaims a reformer or *mujaddid* will be sent every hundred years, in order to support his messianic claims (Phillips 1988: 1).

Little is known about Dwight York's father. York announced in 1973 that his true biological father was Al Haadi Abdur Rahman al Mahdi, the grandson of the famous Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad (1845–85) who led an uprising against the British in Sudan. York confesses in his *Rebuttal to the Slanderers* (1989) that he was a teenaged gangster and became a "youthful offender." The 1993 FBI report states that in 1964 Dwight York was charged with statutory rape, of possession of a "dangerous weapon" and of resisting a police officer. York received a three-year prison sentence on 6 January 1965 but was paroled on 20 October 1967 (FBI Report 1993).

York encountered Muslim missionaries during his stay in prison and converted to Islam. On his release in 1967, he began to attend the Islamic Mission of America, Inc. mosque on State Street, NY, founded by a West Indian, Sheikh Daoud Faisal, who became his only living spiritual teacher. Sheikh Daoud (1891–1980) had set up two temples attracting African Americans in Philadelphia and in Harlem and was reported in the newspapers as having 100,000 followers. His mission was to establish a peaceful Muslim community, a theocracy under the laws of Allāh. To this end, he purchased the Talbot Estate in East Fishkill, Dutchess County, NY. This became a famous spiritual retreat for Black Muslims, called Medina Salaam. Sheikh Daoud condemned the Nation of Islam for their unorthodox recognition of W.D. Fard as divine and embraced a more orthodox Sunni Islam. In 1967 he insisted that members of his mosque carry 'Sunni identification cards' to prove that they were not affiliated with the Nation of Islam. When York left the State Street Mosque to found his own Muslim movement, he maintained a warm relationship with his old mentor, Sheikh Daoud, and after his death in 1980, York continued to carry a State Street Mosque identity card in his wallet along with his Moorish Science Temple of America card. One finds reprints of these cards in many of his books.

After his release from prison, York supported himself by peddling incense, African perfumes, and body oils on the streets of Harlem and Brooklyn, where he engaged passers-by in philosophical discussions. He assimilated a wide range of esoteric teachings, through street conversations, reading, and attending the sermons at local mosques and temples. In the late 1960s York began to preach his original racist theory. His theory rejects the revelations of Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad concerning the true identity of African Americans as 'Asiatics' (Gomez 2007). York argues that his people originated from the Sudan region of Africa. His disciples today define themselves as 'Nuwaubians' (as opposed to 'Nubians'); a term that refers to the masses of African Americans still sleeping under the 'Spell of 'Kingu' (a figure from Mesopotamian mythology, sometimes associated by York with the biblical Leviathan), not yet awakened to 'Right Knowledge'. Starting with the ancient kingdom of Nubia in Sudan, York traces the lineage of his people back to the Sumerian and Egyptian civilisations, and even beyond that, to the stars. He finally expounds the 'ancient astronaut' theory proposed by Zecharia Sitchin of the Anunnaki, angelic extraterrestrial astronauts who arrived from the planet Rizq, colonised our planet, and built the first great civilisations of Sumeria and Egypt (Sitchin 1976).

In 1967 Dwight York enlisted friends to join his first spiritual circle, Ansaar Pure Sufi. He adopted the title Isa Abdullah and set up a center at 2525 Bedford Avenue in New York. They wore black and green tunics and adopted the symbol of the Crescent, the Star of David, and the Ankh, all intertwined (Phillips 1988: 1–6). In 1968 York changed the name to Nubian Islaamic Hebrews and the dress code switched to African robes (*dashiki*) and the black fez. His 'Nubians' were identified by a small bone in their ears and a nose ring. At that point, York assumed the new title of *imām* Isa and began expounding his racist myth of the 'Canaanites' whose pale skin was the result of the Curse of Ham (Palmer and Luxton 1998: 353).

3 The Ansaaru Allah Community

Between 1973 and 1992, York claimed to be 'the *Mahdī*' and presided over a large Islamic community in Brooklyn known as the Ansaaru Allah Community. This phase began with his journey in the summer of 1973 to the Sudan, where he sought out the descendants of the famous Sudanese *Mahdī*, Muḥammad Aḥmad (1845–1885). Imitating the custom of pilgrims to Africa from the Nation of Islam, York had his photograph taken standing before the *Mahdī*'s tomb at

Khartoum University. He met members of the *Mahdī*'s family and had his photograph taken in their company (York 1978: 3–4). He claimed he was initiated into the Order of Al-Khiḍr and also into a Sufi Order of Khalwatiyya (Gardell 1996: 226) which prepared him for his role as the *mujeddid* (reformer). York reports that this initiation took place at the junction of the White Nile and the Blue Nile in Egypt, where he experienced a mystical visitation. He describes his encounter with Archangel, Al-Khiḍr (the Muslim version of the Archangel Michael) who had guided Moses. He describes Al-Khiḍr as the “Highest of all Angels” (York 1980: 11–12). York also claims he beheld the 24 Elders of St John's Revelations (York 1986a).

Upon his return to New York in 1973, York declared that he was a direct descendant of the Sudanese *Mahdī*, since he was born in June, exactly one hundred years after his great-grandfather, and that he had acquired a degree in Islamic law during his stay in Sudan. He then claimed to be the Return of the *Mahdī* by adding the title ‘*Mahdī*’ to his honorific name (al Imām Isa Adbullah Muhammad al Mahdi) and published a new book, *Muḥammad Aḥmad the Only True Mahdi* (1976). York then renamed his movement the Ansaaru Allah Community and discarded most of the Jewish features of the Nubian Islaamic Hebrews. He rationalises this development in one of his scrolls: “I opened the seal in 1970, as prophesied. I founded this community exactly one hundred years after the foundation of the Ansaru ALLAH Community ... in Sudan by Muḥammad Aḥmad Al Mahdi, my great grandfather. There is no co-incidence!” (York 1986b: 79). York's followers changed their attire to the long white robes and turbans of the Sudan.

3.1 *The Expansion of the Ansaar Movement*

The Ansaar Allah Community expanded rapidly in the Bushwick Avenue neighborhood, acquiring thirty buildings to set up a mosque, a large communal residence with a home school, a bookstore, two recording studios, several restaurants, a grocery store, and a laundromat. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms began its investigation into the AAC on the mid 1980s for suspected arson, for harbouring criminal fugitives, for welfare fraud, and for purchasing and stockpiling illegal weapons. The FBI investigators estimated that around five hundred people were living in the Ansaar community during its peak in Brooklyn. One ex-member who became an FBI informant claimed York had as many as 2000 to 3000 followers across North America during the 1970s (FBI Report 1993). Men wore the long white robes and turbans, women wore white dresses and face veils, and the Ansaar literature projected an image of a rigorous, conservative Islam. York even tried

to legitimate his new title by applying for a new passport on 7 October 1987 under the name Isa Al Haadi Al Mahdi. He was immediately arrested for passport violation but was released on probation.

The AAC sent out missionaries to Baltimore, Cleveland, Atlanta, Newport, Virginia, Washington DC, and Philadelphia. They established teaching centers in their chain of bookstores, known as the Tents of Kedar, and held classes in esoteric philosophy and Blackosophy and Question & Answer meetings. By the 1980s Ansaaru Allah Communities had established centers in Canada (Montreal and Toronto), in the UK in the London suburb of Brixton, in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and in the Jamaican Islands (Palmer 2010). In 1983 York purchased a lodge on eighty acres of woodlands in the Catskills for \$145,000. He called it Camp Jazzir Abba and it became a summer retreat for AAC families. In 1988 York retired from his role as *imām* at the Brooklyn mosque, delegating a new *imām*, and in 1989 he began to spend most of his time at Camp Jazzir, where he organised military training drills and survival workshops.

3.2 *Social Organisation*

There were two levels of membership in the AAC. The majority of York's disciples were short-term associate members who wore the appropriate garments and symbols, read the scrolls, and participated in the Sunday afternoon Question & Answer class/discussions. The more committed members would eventually move into the local commune housed above, or next door to, the bookstore, to work as 'peddlers' and 'propagators' on the streets. But the great majority of these 'Muslims', 'Hebrews', or 'Moors' would defect during the group's next convulsion as it morphed into a new spiritual phase. Many Ansaars who left moved on to join more mainstream branches of Sunni Islam, notably Warith Deen Muhammad's, World Community of Al-Islam in the West.

But at the core was a more loyal and intimate group of disciples. These were York's Ministers (teachers), his Propagators (missionaries), his *muhajid* (bodyguards and security force), and his 'wives' or concubines. York's seeming disorganised and rapidly mutating movement was held together by an internal secret Masonic order. Male disciples belonged to the Order of Melchesidek, and females to the Eastern Star. Based on the highly disciplined, hierarchical structures found in Freemasonry, these secret Orders were a stable force of authority amidst the transitory phases of York's more ephemeral groups.

3.3 *Gender Roles and Family Life*

The Ansaar literature advocates polygamy, but only for the top leaders. As York, (a.k.a. Imām Isa) explains in *Hadrat Fatimah, Part Two* (York 1988: 23–24), ideally, a man should have four wives: the Domestic Wife; the Companion Wife;

the Educated Wife; and the Cultured Wife. Each wife specialises in certain tasks and possesses unique desirable qualities: The Domestic Wife does cooking and laundry, the Companion Wife listens to her husband's problems and offers friendship, the Educated Wife's job is "to be an encyclopedia of facts for her husband" and to educate the children, and the Cultured Wife creates money-making schemes for her husband, has knowledge of the arts and culture, and "is naturally talented at pleasing him sexually" (York 1988: 23–24). Of course, this model of Muslim polygamy is outside the norms of orthodox Islam, and elicited criticism; that York was running a "cult" (Phillips 1988).

York's family, his male executives and bodyguards lived in apartments with their own biological families near the mosque on Bushwick Avenue. Most of York's female disciples lived with their husbands in the Brooklyn neighborhood, but York's wives and concubines lived in his house or in adjoining women-only apartments. They worked in the publishing office or in Passion, the recording studio. They spent their days researching material, co-authoring, typing, editing, printing and publishing the scrolls (under York's supervision) and handling mail orders and deliveries. Some of York's wives presided over the children's boarding school as teachers or administrators.

Women in the AAC appeared to lead a segregated life, apparently relegated (at least in the Ansaar literature), to the domestic role. But in fact, the women were the executives who ran the movement behind their veils. They were the administrators who controlled the finances, ran the school, and handled the newsletter and the publishing press.

On joining the community, the new brothers and sisters would fill out a form and have their photographs taken. Husband and wives and unmarried couples were separated and lived in same-sex quarters. The sisters slept three to six in one bedroom, each with their own mat and bag of belongings, sharing one bathroom. The brothers were sent out to be Propagators and slept on shelves or on the floor in same-sex "barracks" (Phillips 1988). New members gave their money and furniture to the community. Clothing was shared also. Contact with outsiders, with former friends or blood kin, was forbidden. Outsiders were regarded as *Kaafirs* (unbelievers), and secular society was *Dunyaa* (the lower, material realm) (Phillips 1988).

Mothers and pregnant women applied for public assistance. Welfare checks were turned over to the whole community. One of Phillips' informants described a woman who "was complaining that she had to turn over her whole check to the community, and sometimes she needed personal money to do things. So, she took some out secretly because it was hers. That's how they had to do it." One disciple notes, "Isa justified this dependency on welfare by saying that during the time of slavery all black people got a certain amount of mules

and after slavery it stopped, so this is a way of the white people paying black people back" (Phillips 1988: 151).

In 1989 two lavish weddings were held in the AAC to celebrate the marriage of two second-generation girls to men from the Middle East. One of them was Afifah, York's eighteen-year-old daughter. She married As Sayyid Kamal Ahmad Hassib, the Arabic teacher in the community, in a ceremony in the mosque that blended Islamic and Jewish symbols and featured a procession under held canopies (Osinski 2007: 60–61). After that, there were no more wedding ceremonies. Members were told to choose their own 'mates' in an informal fashion. York sometimes assigned mates for his men. On occasion, he would choose people who were completely inappropriate and match them together as a joke (interview with Jacob York and the author in Atlanta, GA, August 2003).

Children played a central role in the AAC, for the salvation of the community depended upon them. There were over one hundred children living in the AAC (Phillips 1988: 152). Ansaar children were separated from their parents, attended the Ansaar home school, and slept in the children's quarters of the commune. One woman interviewed by Philips described how she decided not to join the AAC because she disagreed with the way they restricted the members' contact with their own parents outside the AAC, and with the way they separated children from their parents inside the community. The Ansaar children were raised to speak Hebrew, Arabic and 'Nubic' (a language created by Dr York, a blend of Arabic and Ebonics), but they spoke no English. They could be seen by their parents and visitors chanting the Qur'an daily in the AAC mosque (Palmer 2010).

York placed a great deal of emphasis on what he called "genetic breeding." Predicting an apocalypse in the year 2000, he urged Ansaar parents to make haste and procreate the 144,000 Nubian children who would "rapture" their parents as the reign of Shaytan (the Devil, associated with the "Paleman") winds down (York 1990). He warned his people that, because they are "subliminally taught that light skin is more attractive, they will tend to choose a light-complexioned mate, and produce children who, in four generations will have straight hair." "The Paleman," York warned them, "will try to pick apart our genes and take what is beneficial to him ... and incorporate it into himself." That is why the Paleman is resorting to "sperm banks, fertilized egg banks and DNA banks" (York 1992a: 12).

Phillips' informants report that men were denied access to their wives or mates unless they brought in sufficient funds. If successful, they would be given an appointment in the 'Green Room'. The AAC's practice was to permit intimate relations between mates once every three months or so in the Green Room, also known as 'Eden' (a room decorated with murals of a tropical

plants and jungle scenes). Many of Phillips' informants complained of how their sex life was controlled by Imām Isa, and of how he would seduce his disciples' wives. It is interesting to note that the United Nuwaubian nation's "factology" website in 2008 offers an apology for the Green Room called "Green Room Blues":

Resurfacing is the history of one of our schools (Islam). Green rooms were lodgings for couples who achieved a certain criterion, to spend a night therein. We lived communally and genders were separated. A few faultfinding former fellows feel, 'oh, the embarrassment ... they wanted to control our sex lives!' Followers joined the Ansaaruallah community to grow spiritually, advance the cause and were always free to leave.³

As for the men, York's close friends and relatives tended to become Ministers. Most of them had wives, and their role was to preach, teach, and preside over Question & Answer meetings held on Sunday afternoons at the far-flung bookstores located in the crowded black ghetto areas of the major cities in America and the West Indies. Below the Ministers were the Propagators, who were fundraisers and missionaries. They were sent out every day to work on the street as peddlers and propagators of 'Right Knowledge'. They sold exotic-scented oils and incense on the street. Besides *tableeghing* (*tabligh* in mainstream Islam, means the communication of a message or revelation, interchangeable with *dawah* or propagation of faith) the Propagators sold Dr York's esoteric books and handed out flyers to spiritual seekers and pedestrians of African descent, seeking to engage them in philosophical discussions about Right Knowledge.

3.4 *The Appeal of the Ansaaru Allah Community*

On the basis of interviews with members at the Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn bookstores, and informal conversations with participants in the Tama Re festival in June 2004, as well as four of my students' interviews with ex-members in Montreal (Palmer 2010: 59–68), it is possible to gain some insights into the appeal of the Ansaaru Allah Community. Sifting through the data, we found that there were three main motives for conversion to this radical, racist new religion:

1. The appeal of Black Nationalism. Several informants describe their quest for a new racial identity uncontaminated by white stereotypes of the 'negro' or the 'coloured person' in America;
2. The quest for the 'true Islam';

³ See www.factology.com/20020921.htm#york. Accessed 28/01/2008.

3. The need for moral reform. Many informants claimed they chose the AAC's strict communal life based on cleanliness and prayer, away from the temptation of drugs, wine, recreational sex and idle materialistic pursuits.

4 Conflicts and Controversy

For the first few years of its existence, the AAC was noncontroversial. The group moved into impoverished, drug-ridden Brooklyn, Philadelphia and other cities, and quickly established order and cleanliness. The AAC's security force or *mujahim* (sic) (*mujahideen* is the term for Islamic guerrilla fighters in mainstream Islam) formed a vigilante team to protect the neighbourhood from shoplifters and armed robberies. They managed to rid Bushwick Avenue of drug dealers. In the first news reports that came out about the group, both the Mayor and the Brooklyn police went on record commending the AAC for the good work they were doing in the Bushwick community (interview with Paul Greenberg, documentary filmmaker).

By the late 1970s the AAC was under investigation by the FBI. A network of interest groups began to form in the mid-1970s, to share information regarding the AAC. Among them were the orthodox Muslim missions, the NYPD, the Welfare Office, the IRS, the INS, the FBI, the ATF, and, most importantly, disgruntled ex-members who were beginning to form their own, informal networks. The 1993 FBI report records the various complaints received from these different interest groups. This report cites fifteen confidential informants and calls for a "full domestic terrorism investigation" of the AAC (FBI Report 1993: 2). The "criminal connections" of the AAC are mentioned, and the report notes that many of York's disciples are ex-convicts or parole violators. The 1993 FBI Report portrays the AAC as a criminal enterprise disguised as a religious community in order to harbor thieves, murderers and escaped convicts. Its apparent success was only due to the vigilantism, intimidation and "protection racket" of York's private militia (FBI Report 1993).

A handful of York's former disciples, who had held high positions in the AAC, became its most vociferous critics. Several women launched paternity suits against York, and two of his former wives were to file child support actions against him (Osinski 2007: 142–53). Several male defectors from the AAC became FBI informants. Siddiq Muhammad Redd had joined 1970, and worked for eight years as York's driver, accompanying him to Baltimore, Washington DC, and Trinidad to open branches of the AAC. After eleven years of service, Redd left the AAC in 1981, claiming it was not "true Islam" (Osinski

2007: 69). Siddiq's name appears as Saadik Redd in the 1993 FBI Report, where he is quoted describing the harsh living conditions inside the AAC. He claims he shared barracks with other men in an abandoned house with no heat or hot water or beds. He noted that the conditions in York's house were "totally opposite from how the people lived." He described York as an irresponsible womaniser: "He would meet a person and their wife and sleep with their wife just to show he had control over you" (Phillips 1988: 140–149).

The vigilante peacekeeping activity of the AAC's *muhajim* is interpreted in this report as a "protection racket." FBI's informant 'T-C' claimed that in the summer of 1990 the AAC "muscle[d] their way into a security contract with a number of local businesses and used force against the security company already under contract" (FBI Report 1993). On apprehending a shop-lifter the AAC guards would not call the police, but beat up the culprit themselves. T-3 also claimed that the AAC raked in \$5000 to \$6000 a week in protection payment from intimidated storeowners (FBI Report 1993). Ironically, just as the FBI Report was being compiled, the AAC was simultaneously receiving congratulations from Ed Koch, New York's mayor in the 1980s, for purging the streets of crime and drugs. At the time, it was under investigation by the New York Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms for suspected arson, for harbouring criminal fugitives, for welfare fraud, and for purchasing and stockpiling illegal weapons (FBI Report 1993: 6–12).

The Welfare Office was investigating the possibility of welfare fraud. FBI informant 'T-9' claimed that all the women in the AAC commune were on public assistance. As soon as one woman would become pregnant, T-9 claimed, all the other women would take a specimen of her urine to the women's center in Manhattan to obtain a letter verifying their pregnancy. By this means, every single woman was able to apply for welfare as an unwed mother, each using a different, fake address. These checks would be cashed and handed over to the AAC to support the commune (FBI Report 1993).

A criminal investigation was launched in 1979 into the murder of Horace Green (Wagonner 1979). Green had antagonised the Ansaars by lobbying to halt what he feared as the AAC's "takeover" of his neighbourhood in Brooklyn. On the morning of 19 April 1979 he was shot with two bullets in the head as he went to open the daycare center that he managed on Hart Street, near the AAC mosque (Anon. 2002). Suspicion fell upon Roy Savage, known as Hasim the Warrior who (according to FBI informants T-5 and T-4) was part of the *mujahim*. But Savage's guilt was never proven, and the murder remains unsolved to this day.

An arson investigation was launched after a series of fires broke out near the AAC mosque on Bushwick Avenue, between 1976 and 1991; five fires which just so happened to facilitate the AAC's expansion in the area. According to the FBI Report, "it is common knowledge that many buildings in the areas in Brooklyn ... had mysteriously burned [and] York would subsequently purchase these properties at city auctions" (FBI Report 1993: 6). An ATF investigation into illegal firearms possession was also launched. In 1983 York had bought an 81-acre camp near the town of Liberty in Sullivan County, NY, for Camp Jazzir Abba. The AAC constructed six bungalows and huge house built around a double-wide trailer and proceeded to hold summer camps for AAC families. Armed guards and dogs manned the gate of Camp Jazzir Abba. Inspectors were sent in to check on building codes and land use violations (interview with Jacob York in Atlanta, GA, August 2003).

An AAC newsletter from that period advertises workshops in survival skills, in preparation for impending disasters. It features a photograph of military training exercises with rifles. In October 1983 the NYSP received complaints of gunfire coming from Camp Jazzir Abba in Sullivan County, New York. The FBI informant T-2 claimed he had seen many guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition at the Camp Abba Jazzir (FBI Report 1993: 9–11). In May 1989 the BATF began to investigate the guns purchased at various guns shops on Long Island, by two of York's disciples, who gave the AAC address and were accompanied and driven away by Dr York (FBI Report 1993: 8–10). The BATF reported that nineteen assault rifles, one M1 and over four thousand rounds of ammunition were purchased in May to June 1989. The FBI Report features a list of the guns purchased in the New York area—seven Ruger mini-14's, four twelve gage shotguns, and one .22 caliber rifle—all purchased within a four-month period.

4.1 *The Muslim Counter-Cult Opposition*

In 1979 Dwight York formed a music group called Doctor York and the Passion and began to perform in the nightclubs and dance halls of New York, an activity explained in his writings as a "sacrificial missionary" (Phillips 1988: 13). According to filmmaker Paul Greenwood, "the notion of an *imām* working as an entertainer was offensive to some orthodox Muslim leaders, as was the Ansaar custom of soliciting funds on trains."

By the late 1970s a counter-cult movement had formed among Orthodox Muslim groups in the Brooklyn area, whose opposition to the AAC was based on theological concerns, in particular York's messianic, prophetic claims. These Muslim heresiologists included Abdullah ibn Ridn Al-Bidaah, Director of the General Administration for Qur'aans in Ridh, Dr Ahmad Muhammad Jalli,

Assistant Professor of Islamic theology at Omdurman University in Sudan, Dr Maneth Al-Johani, Secretary General, World Assembly of Muslim Youth. They denounced the group as “a dangerous anti-Islamic cult operating in America” (Phillips 1988: Appendix 111). Bilal Phillips, an Islamic scholar and counter-cultist, wrote a book, *The Ansar Cult in America* dedicated to “exposing the falsehood of heretical movements disguised under the cloak of Islam” (Phillips 1988). Initially, York weathered this criticism with aplomb. He denounced Bilal Phillips and other orthodox Sunni leaders in his scrolls, while freely appropriating passages from their sacred literature.

In 1989 Dr York launched a counterattack against Bilal Phillips and his Muslim critics. Writing as Al Mahdi As Sayyid Isa al Haadi, he published *The Ansar Cult. The Truth about the Ansaruallah Community in America. Rebuttal to the Slanderers* (1989). In this York denounces all previous translations of the Qurʾān, claiming only his nineteenth translation to be the supreme Code of the Qurʾān. He condemns mainstream Muslims for hiding the “fact” that Muḥammad was Black. He dismisses the first three Khalifs as “usurpers” and rejects Abū Bakr as Muḥammad’s successor, arguing that since all the prophets of the Bible and the Qurʾān were Black and Muḥammad was Black, since his friend and successor, Abū Bakr was White, this means that the lineage of Islam was compromised from the beginning (Phillips 1988: 181–82). Next, York traces the true line of succession back to his grandfather, the Sudanese *Mahdī* (whose birthday he shared), which proves that he, Dwight York, was the one and only legitimate successor to Muḥammad. He even challenges the leadership of the Nation of Islam by proclaiming that he, Al Mahdi, was ‘The One’ whom Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam had come to herald.

In 1992, Dr York suddenly rejected Islam, and denounced all Muslims. He produced a book *360 Questions to Ask The Orthodox Sunni Muslims* (1992d) attacking Islam. Reverting to his former Hebrew themes, York announced he was now “The Lamb, Liberator of Women.” Women were told to take off their veils and modest robes. They were to be allowed to wear shorts, drive cars and preach in the mosque, now called “the tabernacle.” An explanation for this unexpected *volte face* was provided by York’s estranged son, Jacob York:

Then Dad wrote [*360 Questions to Ask The Orthodox Sunni Muslims*]. This got a negative reaction from the Muslim community. He already had a lot of New York mosques opposing him. This was after the assassination of a Jewish journalist by a Muslim. The same man came to see Dad the day before and asked him to come downstairs and talk to him. But Dad never went, because he was changing his clothes and kept getting delayed.

There were always a lot of people waiting to talk to him. Then, the next day he heard this guy had murdered a Jew. He concluded that someone had taken out a contract on him as a heretic, that if he'd gone downstairs, it would have been him who was killed. He was anti-Muslim after that.

interview with JACOB YORK in Atlanta, Georgia, August 2003. See also PALMER 2010: 68

Here, Jacob refers to the 5 November 1990 assassination of Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League, by a Muslim terrorist, Sayid Nosair. Nosair was acquitted of Kahane's murder but was later tried and convicted for his role in the 1993 WTC bombing (Juergensmeyer 2003: 59). After his close encounter with an assassin, York debriefed the Anssaru Allah Community and changed his movement's name to The Holy Tabernacle Ministries, reverting to his earlier Hebrew motifs. He got rid of the crescent and adopted the Star of David as the main symbol. He discarded his titles of *Imām* and *Mahdī*, and called himself Rabboni or 'The Lamb'.

In 1993 York's movement adopted the title, the United Nuwaubian Nations of Moors (UNNM). They sold all their properties in Brooklyn, and the executive leaders relocated to 475 acres of farmland in Georgia and began constructing an Egyptian village to be the Mecca in the West. They began to call themselves the Yamassee Native American Moors of the Creek Nation and claimed their sacred territory in the state of Georgia (called 'The Land') was a 'Sovereign Nation'. Upon arriving in Georgia, York's followers began to refer to their Master Teacher by his tribal name, as Maku or Chief Black Eagle. They now belonged to the Yamassee tribe, and it became fashionable to dress in cowboy gear, or in Plains Indians dress (Osinski 2007: 122).

4.2 *The Issue of Plagiarism*

Dr York has been accused of plagiarism by many, including journalist William Osinski, and the Muslim heresiologist, Bilal Phillips. Even York's his own son, Jacob, said in our interview. "My Dad was [a] reader. In the early days he wrote for days at a time—but he used to plagiarize a lot." Jacob then told a story to prove his point:

He was given Zecharia Sitchin's *The Twelfth Planet* by a brother who came in and said, 'You've got to read this book!' So, he stayed up all night reading it. The next day, he sent the brother and his whole family off on a mission to the Trinidad mosque to get him out of the way so he could steal the book. He gave it to his secretary and told her to incorporate it into the philosophy. He would give books and ideas to his all-girl research

team, and they would cobble it all together. He would then look it over, edit it—and it would come out in the next publication.

In new religious movements the line between inspirational influences and plagiarism can be very tenuous. It appears reasonable to assume that many mystics and prophets undergo a period of apprenticeship perusing esoteric writings and attending the discourses of spiritual masters, and that these influences may be evident in their theology.

Inspired prophets do not consider themselves subject to the mundane rules of copyright that govern the material plane. Dr York complains that the “Holy Books” have been adulterated and “plagiarized,” and that his mission is to *restore* the revelations of the Eloheem to their original form. In *The Bible Mastery Series* he complains:

Both of these so-called holy books [Bible and Koran] that you hold in your hand today, were plagiarized and taken from ancient tablets such as the Enuma Elish (which can be found in *The Holy Tablets*), as a guide for you by Tammuz, one of the Eloheem (Elo-Heem, Aramic/Hebrew—*these beings*) assigned to you.

York reveals that each “copy” of the “ancient tablets”—the Torah, then the New Testament, and then the Koran—“was getting further away from the original written truth,” and that the true versions of these original “tablets” can be found only in *The Holy Tablets*.

Gomez offers a sensitive analysis of plagiarism in his discussion of Noble Drew’s process of “innovation, reciprocation and appropriation”: “Noble Drew certainly initiated some ideas, but he just as certainly borrowed other concepts and was influenced by the whirl of events around him. The line of demarcation [that separates] original from recycled ideas ... are not always evident” (Gomez 2005: 215). In his broader discussion of mutual influences among Black social movements in the early nineteenth century, Gomez observes, “the congruency of perspective among the various movements allowed for the absorption of multiple influences without necessarily compromising the integrity of the core beliefs and practices.”

These insights would apply to Dr York’s use of source material. Dr York clearly pays homage to his gifted predecessors, but he cannot be dismissed as a mere copyist, for he has developed his own synthesis of earlier doctrines. On occasion he uses these disparate influences in the most inspired ways. While his sources are recognisable, his evocations are not dry or stale. He rewrites the past in order to revitalise it for the present.

5 Interpreting Dr York's Movement

As the account above of Dr Malachi Z. York's forty-year movement demonstrates, this charismatic prophet has founded, renamed, or debriefed an exotic *series* of at least seven Black spirituality movements. Over the years, York's disciples have experienced corresponding shifts in their racial identity. They have defined themselves as black Jews or Muslims, as 'Brown' Moors, as the 'Red' Indians, and even as the 'Green' descendants of extraterrestrials whose skin turned rusty as they entered our atmosphere. Dr York has guided his disciples along a convoluted path full of surprises. They have tried on and discarded the 'masks' of Hebrews, Egyptians, Moors, Muslims, Yamassee Indians, Freemasons, and Shriners.

York's critics and supporters have given four reasons that account for these radical changes: 1. they are a marketing strategy; 2. they are signs of a fake religion; 3. they are a pedagogical device; 4. they are a test of loyalty; and 5. they are part of a survival strategy. A sixth interpretation can be found in the sociology of religion, in Colin Campbell's model of the cultic milieu (Campbell 2002 [1972]). Hostile ex-members tend to interpret Dr York's eclecticism and experimentation as a *marketing strategy* aimed at Black youth. A former Ansaar, Abdul-Muta'al, explained the group's change of name to Nubian Islamic Hebrews as a "psychological ploy":

[Its purpose was] to attract people, black people, anyone seeking Islamic knowledge, also to attract black Jews. The title of the organization has changed and will keep changing as a psychological ploy to attract people and replenish those who leave. There was a time when the ... African drum was a symbol ... and when the steel drum became the ... symbol to accommodate people coming from the Caribbean. He took on titles like the Lion of Judah because a lot of these people were Rastafarians formerly. He packaged himself wisely. He just reorganized his presentation.

PHILLIPS 1988: 165–66

A similar explanation was provided by Dr York's estranged son, Jacob York, who claimed the purpose of the changes was to raise funds: "This was just a way to make people spend money. Every time he changed the religion, people would have to buy new clothes, new books, new oils. He was a great marketer."

York's critics claim the changes demonstrate the essential phoniness and illegitimate nature of York's religion. Journalist William Osinski portrays York as

a salesman who, in order to “sell his utopia,” needed to “find a new way to dress up.” “Packaging is everything,” Osinski writes: “like any successful businessman launching a new venture, York test-marketed” (Osinski 2007: 105). An FBI agent expresses the opinion that, “York was a criminal who was simply trying to use race as a smokescreen for his plan to make Tama Re the base for expansion of his criminal empire” (Osinski 2007: 215). Phillip Arnn, a researcher with the Watchman Fellowship (a Christian fundamentalist organisation) called the Nuwaubian nation “almost a caricature of a cult” (Osinski 2007: 177).

York’s disciples posit a more sophisticated interpretive framework and explain the radical transitions in their movement as a *pedagogical device*. They claim the Master Teacher has intentionally guided them through the world’s great religious traditions in order to educate them, and to cultivate an ‘overstanding’ of all the world’s religions. This notion is expressed in an HTM publication:

We, the Nubian people, went through a religious metamorphosis. In the 1960s to the 1970s our spiritual guide Rabboni ... took us through the religion of Christianity ... Also in the 1970s he taught us about African, 5%, Hebrews and Islamic doctrines which was the time of knowledge. During the 1980s he educated us about Egyptology and Islam, which gave us wisdom. Now in the 1980s there is no faith in any foolishness, only truth and wisdom you couldn’t possibly overstand! He has taught us that he took us through all these phases in order to create an immunity from all the garbage that we have been taught all of our lives by the evil one. We had to live through it to make it.

YORK 1992b

They claim this teaching method encourages skepticism. As one disciple put it, “When I talk to a Jew or a Christian, I can really talk, because I have lived through their experience. So, I can’t be fooled.”

A fourth explanation is presented by Dr York himself; that the starting transformations in his movement are *tests of loyalty*. He elaborates on this point:

At first, many people joined the mission because it was the style: to be ‘black’ and cultural. I drew many hypocrites—phonies who just wanted to ‘play Muslim’. They didn’t want to work to build a nation. They just wanted to dress in African clothing, play drums and listen to me speak. I called them the ‘first fruits’. In nineteen seventy and two AD, after returning from Sudan I drew a literal line in the masjid floor, and said: those who wanted their ‘culture’, but did not want to sacrifice to build for

the future were excluded. The mission was then carried on by those who were willing to work for perfection.

YORK 1992b

In 1993, after York relocated the group to Georgia, his disciples explained the new “cowboy” theme as a test of loyalty: “in order to get everybody away from doing their own thing; those that truly followed the Lamb wherever he may lead them, trusted in him and wore western clothes and even listen to country western music, simply because he asked them to” (York 1992b).

A fifth explanation of York’s *modus operandi* is to analyze it as a *survival strategy*. It is interesting to note that when faced with a serious level of opposition, York’s characteristic response has been to flee and hide. Instead of confronting his enemies, or pursuing legal courses of self-defence, York tends to resort to *mythic solutions* to conflict. When the AAC in Brooklyn met with cultural opposition from the network that included the welfare office, the police, the FBI, the BATF, ex-members and Muslim leaders, York withdrew to Camp Jazzir Abba in the Catskills. There he waxed apocalyptic, the group bought guns and established a survivalist training camp. By the 1990s the ATF had become too intrusive, and the AAC was the subject of a police investigation into the murders committed by his former bodyguard, Hasim the Warrior, and York’s life had just been threatened by a Muslim assassin. York responded to this pressure in his characteristically chameleonesque fashion. He discarded his ‘Muslim’ persona, changed his title, his costume, and assumed a ‘Hebrew’ identity. This established a precedent for how York and his followers would respond to conflict in the future by changing shape, recasting their corporate image, and assuming new titles and new disguises.

A sixth explanation for York’s eclecticism and mutability may be found in the micro-sociology of NRMS. If we look closely at York’s cultural background, and if we scrutinise the ecological niche that sustained his ephemeral spiritual groups, we come face to face with the ‘cultic milieu’.

5.1 The ‘Cultic Milieu’

The British sociologist Colin Campbell (1972) coined the term “cultic milieu” to describe the spiritual underground of esoteric teachings, pseudo-scientific theories and “forgotten knowledge” found in most post-industrial societies. He argues that it is in this fertile milieu that “cults” take root, sprout up, and begin to grow:

The cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society ... it includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices ...

Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine ... the world of the occult, and the magical, spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations ... these heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded as one entity—the cultic milieu.

CAMPBELL 2002: 53–54

The cultic milieu tends to thrive during periods of revolution and social ferment, and it is oppositional by nature. It is a zone where proscribed, forbidden knowledge can be accessed; a place where countercultural ideas, theories, speculations can be presented, discussed, mutated and exchanged by spiritual seekers and leaders of *ad hoc* groups who come and go. But the cultic milieu is not a 'cult' *per se*, but rather a "society of seekers" (Campbell 2002: 65). The sole thread that unites these denizens of the cultic milieu is a shared rejection of the paradigms, the orthodoxies, of their societies. Their ideas are considered 'unscientific', hence unacceptable to the social, cultural and political mainstream, although some ideas (like reincarnation) may eventually become fashionable and mainstream (Campbell 2002: 61).

The 'White cultic milieu' is well-known to scholars of Western esotericism. It is accessible to the public through New Age fairs, bookstores, practitioners and their websites. But the 'Black cultic milieu' is barely visible to White New Agers, or to the general population—and it has been virtually ignored by the anti-cult or "cult-awareness" groups (such as the Citizen's Freedom Foundation, Cult Awareness Network, American Family Foundation, and the International Cultic Studies Association). Historians of Black History, however, are quite familiar with this milieu, and have described it in considerable detail (but without referring to Campbell's 1972 model). George Eaton Simpson (1978) and Essien-Udom (1962) each describe the rich matrix of Black occultism in Harlem that contributed to the education of many prophet-founders, such as Noble Drew Ali, founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America. Michael A. Gomez describes how he was nurtured in the cultural environment of Harlem in the early 1900s:

The black diasporic experience had become an ontological question of the first order, such that religion, ideology, political discourse, and cultural production were all called upon ... to achieve some degree of overarching, perhaps totalizing, resolution ... it was into such a tempestuous swirl of intense self-examination and energetic reconfiguration that Noble Drew Ali entered.

GOMEZ 2005: 214

Characteristics of the 'Black cultic milieu' have also been described by Jeremiah Wilson Moses (1988) who notes the "ideological proximity of Christian, Islamic, Hebraic, and atheistic black nationalism ... and the messianic rhetoric characteristic of these movements" (Moses 1988: 185).

5.2 *Dr York and the 'Black Cultic Milieu'*

The Moorish Science Temple of America was established in 1913 in New York by Timothy Noble Drew (1886–1929) who called himself Prophet Noble Drew Ali and claimed to be the last in a line of prophets stretching from Buddha, Confucius, and Zoroaster (Ahmed 1991: 18). Noble Drew Ali said he was commissioned by the king of Morocco to awaken American Blacks to their true identity, and offered them his own translation of the *Holy Koran*, also known as *Circle Seven*; which, on closer examination, turned out to be the plagiarised text of *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus*, authored by Levi H. Dowling (1844–1911).

Dwight York had been a member of the MSTA in his youth and carried a Moorish Science Temple of America 'passport' in his wallet. Since the earliest stages, Dr York and his followers have defined themselves as 'Moors' and worn the fez. York reprinted (or 'translated') Noble Drew's (already plagiarised text) *The Holy Koran: Circle 7* (n.d.) to be sold in the Tents of Kedar bookstores. His preface notes that "Prophet Noble Drew Ali prepared these lessons through the guidance of Allāh" and recommends they be read as "a great source of inspiration." Photographs of Noble Drew are featured, but Dr York's photograph appears on the front and last page of the book.

Dr York also drew on the Black Hebrew prophets' materials. Black Jews claim to be the Ethiopian Jews, the *Falashi*, whose names were taken away during slavery, and who are the true descendants of some of the original tribes of the ancient Hebrews of the Torah (Simpson 1978: 268–269). Prophet F. S. Cherry was the founder of a Black Hebrew association that lasted between 1919 and 1931, and after him at least eight Black Hebrew NRMs arose in Harlem. According to Bilal Phillips, "these groups were given to splintering, disappearing and reorganizing" (1988: 2–3). Dr York founded his Nubian Islamic Hebrew Mission in 1968, and the photographs of Ben Ammi Carter and Yahweh Ben Yahweh, both leaders of the more successful Black Hebrew movements in the late twentieth century, soon appeared in York's scrolls.

York also borrowed heavily from his mentor, Sheikh Daoud, and from the Nation of Islam. He quotes from the writings of Elijah Muhammad and appropriates his creation myth of the evil scientist, Yacoub, who bred the first White babies through a laboratory experiment on the Island of Patmos. York does not denounce Elijah Muhammad, rather, in *The Holy Tablets*, he acknowledges the Messenger as "the third Elijah sent to prepare the way for myself, Malachi ...

the Elijah for this day and time" (n.d.: 1642). Thus, he is suggesting that he is in the role of Jesus Christ in relation to the Messenger, who stands in the place of John the Baptist. York elaborates on this claim in *Malachi: I Will Send you Elijah*, a scroll that reprints many of Elijah Muhammad's sayings (York c.1993). York begins by apologising to the NOI for a statement he made in a previous scroll that offended them, and explains he was merely talking about "Do for Self." Then he claims to have discovered, through listening to old tapes of Elijah Muhammad's sermons from the Savior's Day Gatherings of the 1950s and 1960s, prophecies of a coming Elijah who could be none other than himself, Dr Malachi Z. York.

Dr York also demonstrates a knowledge of the lessons of Clarence 13X of the Five-Percent Nation, for he actually reprinted the latter's teachings and sold them the Tents of Kedar bookstores, entitled *The Book of the Five Percenters* (1991). This book contrasts the Five Percenters' "distorted lessons" with the original NOI version and then abrogates both see York's "Real Meaning by the Reformer" (Knight 2007: 202). York's goal in this publication appears to be to merge the Gods and the Ansaars under his own leadership: "We are establishing the greatest black nation on the planet earth ... guide by ALLAH Himself ... by way of me ... Let's work together. United we are an undefeatable force" (York as Al Mahdi As Sayyid Isa al Haadi 1993: 625).

York may have based his three pillars of "Right Knowledge, Right Wisdom and Right Overstanding" on Afrika Bambaataa's "fifth element" of the Zulu Nation, or vice versa. It is often difficult to know who borrowed from whom. Certainly, Afrika Bambaataa's anti-doctrine of "Sound Right Reasoning" meaning "factology" as opposed to blind beliefs is quoted in the Zulu Nation and the Nuwaubian Nation alike (Chang 2005: 90). It is also possible that Dr York "grafted" his three "Rights R's" from Clarence 13X's "Supreme Mathematics." The Ansaars, in turn, have influenced the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE). Michael M. Knight, in his study of the Five Percenters, finds "a massive amount of [Ansaar] literature has smuggled ideas and motifs into the NGE" (Knight 2007: 203). Many of York's linguistic breakdowns resonate with Five Percenters, such as "gospel" as "ghost spell"; understanding as "overstanding" (a Rastafari term), and prayer for "undertakings" as "overtakings."

Sun Ra's legacy has influenced York's movement, according to Ian Simmons (2009), writing for the *Fortean Times*. A jazz musician, composer and mystic who toured with his jazz band, Arkestra, Sun Ra preached a radical gnostic philosophy (Sun Ra's "equation") that combined Kabbala, Rosicrucianism, channeled revelations, Freemasonry, and Black Nationalism. His "equation" inspired many eminent jazz musicians to join his commune in Philadelphia. Elements of Sun Ra's Afrofuturism and Egyptian imagery are found in Dr York's

scrolls, and the notion of the “Mothership” can be traced to Sun Ra (Petsche 2016: 12, 15).

5.3 *The Ansaaru Allah and Islamic Movements in America*

Paradoxically, much of the appeal of the Ansaaru Allah Community was that it appeared to embody the “real Islam” or the “true Islam.” Visitors to the thriving Ansaar village in Brooklyn between 1973–1992 would see veiled women in the streets, men in flowing white robes and children chanting Arabic verses from the Qurʾān in the mosque. In many of the interviews cited in Philip’s 1988 book, as well as those conducted by this researcher, disciples said they joined because they felt the AAC was the “true” or “real” Islam. Of course, on deeper acquaintance with Dr York’s teachings, the heretical elements that Bilal Philips (1988) points to become apparent.

Over the forty-odd years of its existence, the Nuwaubian movement has established its own ecological niche within the Black cultic milieu. It began with the formation of small, experimental ‘cult-like’ groups, like Ansar Pure Sufi and the Nubian Hebrew, that were eclectic, syncretic, and short-lived. Next, its fluid boundaries commenced to harden into a sect-like formation during the Ansaaru Allah Community phase. For Campbell, a *sect* is distinct from a *cult*, because “their belief in a revealed truth leads to a believer-nonbeliever distinction, rather than the notion of degrees of seekership prevailing in the cultic milieu in general” (2002: 64). Dr York began to reshape his movement into a ‘sect’ when he attacked the credentials of his rival prophets. One of his scrolls, *The Truth: Who do People Say I Am?* (York 1992c), features photographs of twenty Black spiritual teachers, interspersed with disclaimers like: “We need the whole truth, not half-truths or opinions or spookism or myth or the paleman’s religion.” Photographs of Clarence 13X, Marcus Garvey, Ben Ammi, Yahweh Ben Yahweh and Minister Farrakhan are displayed with the caption, “These people can’t save us. They don’t know the way. They speak well, but they get nothing done. They complain, but that’s all. No more lies, no more games!” Once Dr York revealed himself as Al Mahdi, he offered one, exclusive path to salvation, as is typical of a ‘sect’.

But in 1992 York suddenly debriefed the AAC and rejected Islam. He dissolved the sectarian boundaries of his movement, and it quickly subsided back into the Black cultic milieu. The Holy Tabernacles Ministry (HTM) emerged, drawing on the wide range of materials available in this rich, fermenting compost heap of forgotten knowledge. The HTM was characterised by a rampant eclecticism and syncretism, embracing Hebrew motifs blended with ancient Egyptian, Babylonian symbols, ufology and Masonic lore.

All this borrowing did not necessarily imply that the HTM was opening up to other study groups or movements in the Black cultic milieu. Rather, it was appropriating their ideas and withdrawing inward, away from its competitors. As the HTM's boundaries expanded, they also commenced to crystallise, so that by 1993 when York changed the name of his movement to the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors, it had become a self-contained 'spiritual supermarket' offering access to an eclectic range of doctrines, myths, theories, and rituals that had been appropriated from other groups.

A study of other Black nationalist NRMs indicates that as they mature, many of them seek to purify and solidify their own religious tradition (Lee 1996). As Colin Campbell (2002 [1972]: 55) explains, "the continuing pressure to syncretization" is a unifying force, counteracting the fragmentary tendencies caused by enormous diversity in cultural items. One finds this "pressure to syncretization" in The Commandment Keepers, founded by Wentworth Matthew in the 1920s in Harlem. This NRM started out as an eclectic Jewish-Christian synthesis, but Matthew applied twice to be a member of the New York Board of rabbis, and after his death his scrupulously Jewish orientation toward black Judaism was carried forward by the current rabbi of the Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Congregation in Chicago. A similar "pressure" can be noted after Warith Muhammad assumed the leadership of the NOI upon his father Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975. Warith Muhammad proceeded to purge the movement of Christian apocalyptic rhetoric, of UFO lore, and of anti-white sentiments in order to lead his congregation back into mainstream Sunni Islam (Lee 1996).

But York's movement has behaved quite differently. To use an agricultural metaphor, most of the 'Black' NRMs take root in the matrix of the Black cultic milieu, but then they tend to grow like saplings, and sprout up vertically towards a self-contained maturity. York's ephemeral groups, however, behave more like rhizomes (for example, potatoes or strawberries). Lacking firm stems or 'trunks', they reach out their tentacles or tubers, pulling up their shallow roots to drift horizontally, sprouting up as new plants, nurtured in the rich soil of the Black cultic milieu. For over forty years, York has continued to borrow from many sources and his movement waxes ever more eclectic as it matures. To facilitate this nomadic process, York must periodically fold up his tents, debrief his schools, and contradict his own (exoteric) teachings; behavior that might appear to outsiders as being counterproductive.

Dr York's critics have interpreted his erratic behavior as 'proof' of the insincerity of his vision. But for his disciples, Dr York's cryptic style of teaching points to an underlying message. This message corresponds to the Gnostic

revelation of the mystical Self; a Self that, for African Americans, has been long suppressed by slavery, racial stereotyping, self-hatred and prevailing ignorance. Kurt Rudolph begins his classic book, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, by observing that this ancient religion “was known almost exclusively through the work of its opponents” (Rudolph 1987: 9). By reading the heresiological literature of Christian apologists, he notes, “we receive but a weak and distorted reflection” of this ancient religion of the Gnostics.

Randolph might be describing the current situation regarding the Dr York’s disciples. To date, the public has received their information through stigmatising news reports about the ‘Nuwaubian nightmare’; the ‘quasi-religious sect’ founded by a ‘black militant’. In the only two book-length studies of Dr York, one by a Muslim heresiologist (Bilal Phillips) and the other by a journalist (William Osinski), the word “cult” and “evil” appear in their titles. York’s chameleon-like strategy is perfectly consistent with the inner goals of his secret mystery school: to lead his disciples on a winding journey backwards in time, unpeeling layer after layer of false or incomplete identity, towards their origins as godlike beings, utterly alien and inaccessible to the laws and limitations of the Paleman during the reign of Shaytan (Satan). Thus, the external forms of York’s movement are consistent with his underlying spiritual message, which is a Gnostic revelation of the mystical Self: the Self that has been obscured by the miasma of racial stereotyping, self-hatred and self-forgetfulness in which the so-called Black man in America has been enmired.

6 Conclusion

The question of what place Dr York’s movement has within the larger phenomenon of Islam in America might be examined through the lens of different disciplinary perspectives. In historical perspective, the Ansaaru Allah Community appears to be the largest, most long lasting and highly-developed Islamic-style utopian commune in American history. From a theological perspective, it stands out among the other Black Muslim groups as the most eclectic and heretical. In sociological perspective, its ephemeral quality and the rapid divagations of its social structure might be analyzed as an unique and effective *survival strategy* for a NRM nourished by the Black cultic milieu. York created for his followers a self-contained spiritual supermarket of Black nationalist products. This meant that the spiritual seekers who join his movement could sample a wide selection of esoteric lore and ritual practices. They could ‘try on’ different charismatic racial identities. They could study the teachings of Elijah Muhammad or Clarence 13X through Dr York’s reprints without ever having to

venture outside the boundaries of their Nuwaubian culture. York's critics have debunked his 'Black Muslim' movement, pointing to his heretical ideas and manipulative marketing strategies. They have a point, but they have missed something deeper and more complex; a gnostic philosophy and a secret mystery school.

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