

Crossing and Dwelling:
The Leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed

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Abstract: The Nation of Islam created a cultural identity and a religious home for African Americans in the mid-20th Century. Through the application of Thomas Tweed's theory of "crossing and dwelling," this paper examines how, under the leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed from 1975-2008, most of the members of the Nation of Islam transitioned into mainstream Sunni Islam. Mohammed was a successful "homemaker," providing a way for African Americans to "cross and dwell" and to find their identity as both African Americans and members of the international Muslim community.

Keywords: African Americans, Islam, W. Deen Mohammed, racial identity, religion in the U.S.

Following the Great Migration of countless African Americans from the south to the north, many African Americans felt alone and without a proper community in the big cities. In the 1930s, a mysterious man, Wallace Fard Muhammad, offered a new home for African Americans in the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad carried on his work by strengthening the community that African American Muslims had not found in the Christian Churches. Members of the Nation of Islam saw Islam as the "natural" religion of all black people throughout the world.¹ The Nation of Islam provided senses of black nationalism, authority, respect, and power. The Nation also created a home for African Americans by regulating all aspects of life: what they ate and drank, what they wore, and how they acted. Christian "slave names" were

¹ Marsha Snulligan Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American Churches: Responses and Challenges to Religious Pluralism* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1999), 79

dropped and replaced with the letter “X” to show one’s identity within this new community.² The Nation formed its own black community, separate from the white community, complete with schools, businesses, mosques, and even a paramilitary group. The goal of this community was that African Americans become self-sufficient; a goal that was met as “these enterprises prospered as concrete evidence of nationhood.”³ Islam connected African Americans to their Muslim ancestors in Africa.⁴ The slave trade had separated African Americans from their identity as Muslims and had forced Christianity upon them. Given this, Lewis V. Baldwin and Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid write that, “the NOI members believe that African Americans are lost until they discover and reclaim their true Muslim identity and unite with the Nation of Islam.”⁵

When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, his son, W. Deen Mohammed, was chosen as his successor. W. Deen⁶ recognized the important role that the Nation played in creating a home for African Americans, but he worried that several significant flaws in the Nation’s structure and theology would inhibit the future growth of the religion. First, W. Deen thought the Nation was too focused on Black Power and not focused enough on the faith of Islam. Second, he corrected what he saw as the three flaws in the Nation of Islam’s ideology: “that Allah is a man by the name of Fard Muhammad, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is the Messenger of

² Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 28

³ Ibid, 33

⁴ Ibid, 35

⁵ Lewis V. Baldwin and Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 67-68

⁶ To prevent confusion with the Prophet Muhammad, Wallace Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad, I will refer to W. Deen Mohammed as W. Deen in subsequent references.

Allah, and all whites or Europeans are genetically devils.”⁷ Although he denied the teachings of his father and W. Fard Muhammad, W. Deen never criticized his two predecessors. Instead, he saw himself as continuing on the teachings for which members of the Nation of Islam had not previously been ready. “Mr. Fard planned to introduce the Qur’an and real Islam in America,” W. Deen said in a speech. “But he knew blacks were militant and angry with whites, so he sought the angry ones, the dissatisfied ones. And they were accepted and accepted his teachings, but he planted among them the Qur’an.”⁸ W. Fard Muhammad planted the seeds of orthodox Islam and W. Deen was able to grow those seeds into fully orthodox theology. In addition to the difficult task of re-formulating theology there were legal challenges to the Nation of Islam: the assassination of Malcolm X, accusations of drug-dealing within the movement, and pressure from the federal government.⁹ In response to the above issues, W. Deen used the Nation of Islam to help African Americans cross into orthodox Sunni Islam and mainstream American society. He continued his father’s work of building a home for African American Muslims, but he did this in conversation with the wider American and Christian society. Thomas Tweed’s definition of religion as a way “to make homes and cross boundaries” provides an appropriate lens for examining how W. Deen Mohammed was able to use rhetoric in

⁷ Baldwin and Al-Hadid, *Between Cross and Crescent*, 59

⁸ Imam W. Deen Mohammed, “The Interests of All People at Heart: Interview with Imam W. Deen Mohammed,” New Africa Radio, July 28, 2006, <http://www.newafricaradio.com/articles/092206.htm>

⁹ Ibid

speeches, writings and interviews to transition most African American Muslims into Sunni Islam.¹⁰

Making Homes

According to Tweed, religions enable practitioners to make places for themselves and also to move through space—these are his concepts of “crossing and dwelling.”¹¹ In other words, one of religion’s functions is to create a home or a homeland for people. He writes that “[religions] delineate domestic and public space and construct collective identity. Religions distinguish us and them—and prescribe where and how both should live.”¹² From the beginning, the Nation of Islam was about founding a “nation,” or a home, for African Americans. Two tools employed in the construction of this nation were strict rules and stringent separation from white Americans. Contrary to this tradition, W. Deen allowed non-African Americans to join his movement (renamed the American Society of Muslims), and he worked hard to establish a welcoming group for all. He created an identity that included “a worldview resting on faith in God, not on the inferiority or the superiority of races.”¹³ This identity united all members as part of one international Muslim community. In his speeches, W. Deen stressed that, “there is nothing better than the good family life and unity. That is for private life at home or wherever we are. And even more importantly, it is for the family of believers. Believers are a family; we are

¹⁰ Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54

¹¹ *Ibid*, 59

¹² *Ibid*, 75

¹³ McCloud, *African American Islam*, 75

a community.”¹⁴ In another speech, he explained that community is essential to Islam, as “Islam requires, I repeat, that Muslims belong to community life and be about establishing their own identity as a community.”¹⁵ W. Deen situated his followers within both the American community and the international Muslim community.

While W. Deen welcomed non-African Americans into the faith, he still focused on building a home for African Americans. He saw Islam as being particularly suited to African Americans because it was focused on restoring the family and also was tied to how their African ancestors practiced religion. W. Deen saw Christianity as rooted in the experience of slavery, whereas Islam “just happens to be perfectly designed to treat the ills of the underprivileged, deprived African-American people.”¹⁶ In fact, under W. Deen’s leadership the majority of African Americans converted to Islam.¹⁷ In addition, W. Deen made it clear that this new movement centered not on black power, but on the creation of a home for African Americans and others within a larger Muslim community. He said that in the early 1960s the leaders of the Nation of Islam misunderstood the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. They “thought it was all about black and power, being superior as blacks and having money and power. They went after the things of this world and

¹⁴ Imam W. Deen Mohammed, “To Have Life Better and Abundantly,” New Africa Radio, speech given at Masjid Al-Haqq, Newark, NJ, January 11, 2004, <http://www.newafricaradio.com/articles/042304.htm>

¹⁵ Mohammed, “The Interests of All People at Heart.”

¹⁶ Imam W. Deen Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam: Interviews with Imam W. Deen Mohammed* (Chicago: Zakat Publications, 1988), 29

¹⁷ Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American Churches*, 103

lost their own souls.”¹⁸ W. Deen turned the focus to the Muslim faith and away from black power. Through Islam, African Americans could forge a better haven from the world.

Not all members of the Nation of Islam agreed with W. Deen that the focus on black nationalism should be dropped. Louis Farrakhan initially supported W. Deen, but soon became a vocal critic. In 1978, he formally split from W. Deen’s organization and rebuilt the Nation of Islam under the old teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Farrakhan believed that the Nation should continue to maintain a separate home for African Americans. According to Jane Smith, “Farrakhan soon felt that Elijah’s son was leading the group in a direction that would neglect the immediate task of addressing the still unfortunate circumstances of American blacks.”¹⁹ Most of the followers Farrakhan attracted were not disenchanted members of the original Nation, but new converts to the religion enticed by the black power rhetoric. To this day, “the current NOI is basically a black-power movement dedicated to the old separatist ideal of establishing an independent nation.”²⁰

Tweed explains that religions help individuals to define themselves as people, where and how they live, what they are allowed to do and with whom they associate.²¹ Islam defines identities by providing a sense of personal discipline through the regulation of one’s body and actions. W. Deen said that Islam is more

¹⁸ Imam W. Deen Mohammed, “Promoting Excellence in the Best Traditions of African American People...Keeping the Promise,” New Africa Radio, speech given at First Corinthian Baptist Church, New York City, September 18, 2004, <http://www.newafricaradio.com/articles/101504.htm>.

¹⁹ Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 93

²⁰ *Ibid*, 94

²¹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 75

demanding than Christianity and promotes family responsibility and strong male figures. In an interview conducted in 1988, he argued that “strong African-American people want something more demanding. They don’t want something that says you can just relax, lay [sic] down and die.”²² In contrast to this, Islam is a religion of discipline that provides African Americans with a “clear, plain, simple prescription” for life.²³ W. Deen emphatically stated that, “Without discipline you don’t have an Islamic life. Our religion stressed faith but right along with faith it expressed deeds or actions.”²⁴

Additionally, Tweed wrote that “religions record, prescribe, and transmit figurative language and embodied practices about food, sex, health, drugs, dance, trance, gesture, and dress that position the body in time and space.”²⁵ Islam provided all of these prescriptions and regulations for its constituents. It prohibited eating pork, drinking alcohol, wearing inappropriate clothing, gambling, dancing, fornicating, and adultery.²⁶

In addition to promoting discipline, W. Deen continued his father’s work of creating a strong economy for African Americans. In a series of interviews that W. Deen offered in the early 1980s, he encouraged African Americans to use Islam as a way to improve their communities. He pushed African Americans to start businesses so that they could be independent of government aid. African Americans needed to plan for how they could be producers and gain economic freedom. W. Deen said that

²² Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam*, 73

²³ *Ibid*, 101

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 99

²⁶ McCloud, *African American Islam*, 28

strong African American figures, both Christians and Muslims, were needed to lead this campaign and to promote a strong work ethic in the community.²⁷ The biggest barrier to forming an independent economic community was the outside ownership of most businesses in African American neighborhoods. In light of this, W. Deen argued that African Americans “should not be satisfied to let people from across town come into our community and sell us everything that we need, and do everything for us.”²⁸ W. Deen believed that Islam provided the psychological support needed for individuals to be involved in their community. With this religion as a foundation, W. Deen claimed that “we will have the spirit, the ambition, the assertiveness to tackle the hard job of changing our physical picture in our neighborhoods, where our neighborhoods depend on outsiders for business life.”²⁹

Orientation, Suffering and Joy

Tweed asserts that religions provide a way to orient people as they are trying to find their place in the world. This is an important function, since “humans don’t have their bearings, and they want to be oriented in the body, the home, the homeland, and the cosmos.”³⁰ In addition to providing rules for how African American Muslims are to regulate their bodies and a community of support, W. Deen Mohammed used the religious and cultural past of his followers to provide direction for them. As an example of this, because W. Deen was aware that most African American Muslims were converts who had a Christian background he referenced

²⁷ Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam*, 9-10

²⁸ Ibid, 58

²⁹ Mohammed, “The Interests of All People at Heart.”

³⁰ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 151

both the Bible and the Qur'an in his teachings. He frequently alluded to stories in the Bible and described Jesus as a "pious saint" and someone who "even cared about his enemies."³¹ These references to Christianity and the Bible were a way to orient new Muslims by using language with which they were familiar, helping them transition to the unfamiliar language of Islam. W. Deen was careful to remind people that Jesus was a prophet, just like Muhammad, and that the Bible is flawed, whereas Qur'an is the "true, pure, perfect revelation."³²

Another way W. Deen helped African Americans use the past as a tool for reorientation was to focus on reconnecting with their roots. African Americans are a diasporic people; they have been uprooted from their homeland and separated from their religion and culture. They cannot return to Africa and they cannot accept Christianity, so Islam offers a new hope. Since a move to Africa would require them "to pick up [their] lives here and build a life for [themselves]" it is not ideal. Instead, Islam under W. Deen provided a "new origin, a new genesis."³³ Islam is the new source of revelation that orients African Americans to life in America.

In explaining another aspect of his definition of religion, Tweed writes that religions "confront suffering" and "label, prescribe, and cultivate some emotions and obscure, condemn, and redirect others."³⁴ W. Deen addressed shared suffering as a means of uniting his followers but also discussed how Islam brought a more abundant life. He frequently focused on the experience of slavery as paradigmatic of

³¹ Mohammed, "To Have Life Better."

³² Ibid

³³ Mohammed, "The Interests of All People at Heart."

³⁴ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 70

this shared suffering. “Haven’t you been put down as a people lower than any other people on this earth?” W. Deen asked in a speech, “To believe that you were cursed by God, just because of your color?”³⁵ In another speech, he said, “We share the experience we had both in the South and in the North as a sub-class of people, struggling to get full recognition as citizens in America.”³⁶

W. Deen also recognized that this shared suffering had a unique impact on the souls of African American people. He posited that, “slavery had its way of making impressions not only in our minds but also in our souls. Those impressions in our souls give pictures and design to our soul; they make our soul distinguishable or different from the soul of other people.”³⁷ Because of this unique experience of suffering, W. Deen proposed that Islam provided the best way to confront evil. Islam does this by promoting discipline, a strong family and a supportive community and bringing new life to its members.³⁸ Elucidating on the benefits of this religion, W. Deen taught that “God is performing a great work again. He is creating a people again, like He created a people before. And this time, He is creating a people out of the African Americans.”³⁹ W. Deen believed the shared experience of all African Americans was greater than the conflicts between Christians and Muslims. On this basis, he asks, “Don’t you know that no matter what you convert to, before you

³⁵ Mohammed, “To Have Life Better.”

³⁶ Mohammed, “The Interests of All People at Heart.”

³⁷ Mohammed, “Promoting Excellence.”

³⁸ Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam*, 29

³⁹ Mohammed, “To Have Life Better.”

converted to that you were belonging to the life of your people? And what makes our life real for us is our common experiences, our shared experiences.”⁴⁰

In addition to confronting suffering, Tweed also states that religions are about “celebrating wonders as much as wondering about evil.”⁴¹ In a 2004 speech titled “To Have Life Better and Abundantly,” W. Deen listed several ways that Islam intensifies joy in people’s lives. W. Deen said that Allah wants people to live an abundant and joyful life, since “Allah created us to have a good feeling inside. Not that pressure. Not that bad feeling. Not that emptiness. Not that fear. Allah created us to be in Paradise, and I am in Paradise.”⁴² Further, Allah has invited humans to a special life that “gives us a chance to have a bigger and better and more beautiful life, and certainly a much more productive life, than we had before.”⁴³ Third, he claimed that the Qur’an provides the true revelation that will lead to this great life, free from suffering. Finally, W. Deen preached that humans were not created as sinful beings, contrary to how some Christians interpret the Bible. He explained, “Allah has created human beings for excellence and the natural life of the human being is good and motivates or drives the human being towards more and more excellence.”⁴⁴ Thus, Allah wants humans to strive for excellence and to be joyful.

Crossing Boundaries

Tweed also defines religion as a flow that allows people to move across borders and through space. Religions “employ tropes, artifacts, rituals, codes and

⁴⁰ Mohammed, “Promoting Excellence.”

⁴¹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 142

⁴² Mohammed, “To Have Life Better.”

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam*, 41

institutions to mark boundaries, and they prescribe and proscribe different kinds of movements across those boundaries.”⁴⁵ W. Deen Mohammed marked boundaries and created the territory of what it means to be an African American Muslim, but as part of creating this home he also coordinated the crossing from the Nation of Islam to orthodox Sunni Islam. W. Deen can be seen as what Tweed calls a “homemaker” because he managed a crossing from one theology to another, while still maintaining a cultural home for African Americans. Tweed defines homemakers as people who “propelled and redirected devotees through the crisscrossing fissures in the cultural terrain, creating new beds and streams as they went.”⁴⁶ Through his leadership, W. Deen managed several crossings for African American Muslims: from the Nation of Islam into the international Sunni Muslim community; from a Black Nationalist group into mainstream American society; and finally from a closed-off religion to a religion in dialogue with others.

First, W. Deen Mohammed led a successful transition for many African American Muslims from the Nation of Islam theology to orthodox Sunni Islam. He characterized this move as a way for American Muslims to become part of the universal Muslim community, which was attractive to a lot of African Americans. For them, “the desire to belong to a world religious community, something greater than the local setting, is also important.”⁴⁷ Ten years after W. Deen took over as leader, his organization was fully accepted into the international Sunni Islamic

⁴⁵ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 123

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 176

⁴⁷ Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American*, 123

community.⁴⁸ The American Muslims were “part of the world community of Islam, but they also saw themselves as an independent Muslim community among other independent Muslim communities.”⁴⁹ African Americans could still address the needs within their own community, but W. Deen was very careful to distance this movement from black nationalism. He characterizes black nationalist influence as a “hangover from yesterday” that is something which must be discarded “because it was in conflict with the open society and democratic order of an Islamic community.”⁵⁰ As part of this effort to separate from black nationalism, W. Deen immediately dropped some of the more controversial teachings of W. Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad. The Nation of Islam’s beliefs that W. Fard Muhammad was Allah incarnate and that Elijah Muhammad was his messenger were both heretical beliefs to mainstream Muslims, who profess that “there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Last and Final Messenger.”⁵¹ W. Deen dropped these beliefs in order to be considered a member of the international Muslim community. W. Deen also rejected the beliefs that Christians and Jews were enemies and that white Americans were devils. Further, he eliminated the paramilitary group within the Nation, re-organized Muslim practices, like the dates of Ramadan, to go along with Sunni Islam, and cut many strict rules concerning behavior and dress.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid, 104

⁴⁹ McCloud, *African American Islam*, 72

⁵⁰ Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam*, 82

⁵¹ Baldwin and Al-Hadid, *Between Cross and Crescent*, 68

⁵² Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American*, 88

W. Deen was successful in managing this transition to the orthodox form of Islam because he never criticized W. Fard Muhammad or Elijah Muhammad. He was very careful not to appear to doubt the teachings of these well-respected leaders, instead, W. Deen asserted that he was continuing on their teachings. (For a while, he implied that Fard was still alive somewhere and communicating with him.)⁵³ W. Deen said that Elijah Muhammad was unable to share the “true” Islam because African Americans had been knocked down by slavery, and Elijah Muhammad had to pick them back up first. According to Marsha Haney “As a direct consequence [of slavery], sense of self had to be reintroduced and nourished prior to any reception of the full teachings of Islam as presented by Imam [W. Deen] Muhammad.”⁵⁴ W. Deen maintained that it was his father who encouraged him to study the Qur’an and to question the theology of the Nation of Islam.⁵⁵ Because of this encouragement, W. Deen made the Qur’an the ultimate source of authority in his theology.⁵⁶ W. Deen positioned the Nation of Islam as a necessary step in the preparation for orthodox Islam, but he saw Sunni Islam as the true and real religion.⁵⁷

W. Deen Mohammed also helped his followers to cross into mainstream American society. He wanted to distance Islam from the separatist rhetoric of the Nation of Islam. While not ignoring the needs of African Americans, he also encouraged American values such as “patriotism, human dignity, and family

⁵³ Smith, *Islam in America*, 90

⁵⁴ McCloud, *African American Islam*, 74

⁵⁵ Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American*, 108

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 115

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 110

values.”⁵⁸ He frequently called America a land of freedom and democracy, where non-Christians are welcome. W. Deen contends that “this country offers us the freedom to choose our way of life. America is perhaps a place where the idea of freedom is developed to its highest degree.”⁵⁹ Unlike the Nation of Islam, which forbade members to vote or serve in the military, W. Deen encouraged Muslims to be active citizens, exhorting his followers, “As Muslims, we feel obligated, and our religion teaches us that we should be active and supportive of all the good things that a society has established.”⁶⁰ W. Deen was a public figure, which helped him portray Muslims as part of mainstream American society. For example, he was the first Muslim to give the invocation for the U.S. Senate and also gave a prayer during President Clinton’s inauguration.⁶¹

Another way that W. Deen Mohammed helped Muslims transition to mainstream society was through interfaith dialogue. He created the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Program, engaged in discussions with other religious leaders, gave speeches to people of many different faiths, and even met with Pope John Paul II. In his interfaith work, he frequently mentioned that Islam is a religion of peace and unity. For instance, he said, “Islam wants peace, justice and fairness for all people. When we look at our religion in its most important features, we also see that Islam is a religion of unity for all people.”⁶² W. Deen focused on universality and a

⁵⁸ Ibid, 106

⁵⁹ Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam*, 35

⁶⁰ Ibid, 48

⁶¹ Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American*, 105-106

⁶² Imam W. Deen Mohammed, “Building Bridges of Peace and Justice,” New Africa Radio, speech given at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, April 29, 2003, <http://www.newafricaradio.com/articles/021105.htm>.

love for all people—traits he viewed as common to both Muslims and Christians, who must be “charitable and open hearted.”⁶³ Muslims are called to “have a heart that can have room in it for every person on this earth—for all people.”⁶⁴ W. Deen’s meeting with the Pope was significant because it was an opportunity to garner respect and acceptance for African American Muslims. In other words, it helped them transition into mainstream American society. He reflected “if it hit the news that I visited the Pope and came there as a Muslim, but also as a Muslim who came in friendship, to speak with the Pope and have an audience with the Pope, that would free my community to move throughout the United States and be more accepted by Christians.”⁶⁵ Finally, W. Deen depicted Islam as a universal faith that did not create a separate community for African Americans but provided universal support in their struggles. The strength comes from the faith and not from black power. This is evidenced when he states, “our religion speaks to pride, the Koran speaks to the pride of all colors. God says we should respect each other.”⁶⁶

Conclusion

While not as well-remembered as Elijah Muhammad or Malcolm X, W. Deen Mohammed is well-respected as one of the greatest African American Muslim leaders. Before Americans knew much about Islam, W. Deen was frequently the public face of Islam, leading prayers at national events and serving as an interfaith leader. He was able to maintain the home that his father had created for African

⁶³ Mohammed, “The Interests of All People at Heart.”

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American*, 123

Americans in the faith of Islam, but he also successfully coordinated the crossing of hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam. Not all Nation of Islam members agreed with the drastic changes that W. Deen made, and a small percentage followed Louis Farrakhan and remained loyal to the original teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Nonetheless, W. Deen's actions helped to reorient African Americans so that they could maintain a sense of pride but also see themselves as part of mainstream American society and the international Muslim community. W. Deen's work also confronted the shared suffering of slavery and racism by promoting the abundant joy that can be found in Islam. W. Deen Mohammed was a successful "homemaker," providing a way for African Americans to "cross and dwell" and find their identity as both African Americans and members of the international Muslim community.

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