



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Moorish Science Temple of America collection

1926-1967

Sc MG 435

Processed by Hanna Bailey.

Summary

Creator: Moorish Science Temple of America

Title: Moorish Science Temple of America collection

Date: 1926-1967

Source: Purchased from Al - Hajj Talib Ahmed Dawud, December 1990. SCM 90 - 78

Abstract: The Moorish Science Temple of America collection consists of letters, certificates, legal documents, illustrations, pamphlets, programs, newspapers, posters, and other printed material. Accompanying the collection is an itemized list, compiled by the donor, of the contents of the collection.

Access: Advance notice required.

Conditions Governing Access:

Researchers are restricted to the use of photocopies.

Preferred citation: Moorish Science Temple of America collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Hanna Bailey; machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Creator History

The Moorish Science Temple of America was founded by Noble Drew Ali in 1913. The organization was based on a combination of black nationalism and a religious philosophy which blended Christianity and Islam. Noble Drew Ali, born Timothy Drew, was among the first people to introduce Islam to African Americans through his movement.

It is difficult to discern the events of Ali's life because his followers believed he was a prophet and have

combined legends with Ali's actual life story. Ali was born in 1886 in North Carolina. His mother died when he was young, and he was raised by an aunt. His followers claim that this aunt was a wicked woman who once threw her nephew into the furnace; they believe that Ali was saved from the flames by Allah. According to legend, Ali moved to a gypsy camp until he received a message from Allah that he must go on a mission. Supposedly he travelled to Egypt and Morocco, where he studied African history and the Islamic religion. The Moroccan King later sent him to spread Islam among African Americans.

Historians claim that Ali left North Carolina for Newark, New Jersey where he worked as a train expressman. Although he received no formal education, Ali was exposed to Asian philosophy which contains no distinct concept of race. In contrast to pervasive American racism, this philosophy appealed to him. Asian philosophy influenced Ali in the formulation of his own doctrines and in 1913 he founded his first temple, the Canaanite Temple, in Newark. Over the next twelve years he moved westward establishing temples in Pittsburg, Detroit, and Chiacago.

As Ali moved west, his movement took shape and attracted many followers. He claimed to be the prophet Muhammad reincarnated. He believed that Islam was the religion of African Americans before they were enslaved, and that they should return to it. Ali founded and taught the Five Divine Holy Principles of Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom, and Justice. The purpose behind his movement was to "uplift" African Americans. One of the major tenants of the faith concerned the national identity of African Americans. Ali discounted identities created by white Americans, such as "negro," "colored," and "black," claiming that his people originated in Morocco. He referred to all people of color as Asiatics, and to African Americans specifically as Moorish Americans, descendants of the Moors of North Africa. Underlying his claims were two principles. The first was that by identifying with their North African ancestors, as well as with Muslims throughout the world, his followers would have pride in an ancestry to which they had been denied.

The actual religion developed by Ali was largely based on Christianity though it claimed to be an Islamic faith. Ali published *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*
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in approximately 1927, a book which combined the Qu'ran, the Bible, Marcus Garvey's and Ali's own ideologies. Followers treated Friday as their Holy day, worshipped three times daily, greeted fellow members by saying "Peace" or "Islam," and changed their last name by adding the Arabic article El- or -Bey to demonstrate their ethnic identity. A strict moral code forbidding intoxicants, tobacco, hair straighteners, cosmetics, meat, eggs, and other things was prescribed for members.

The movement expanded rapidly in the years 1925-29; some historians estimate thirty thousand members throughout the country at the peak of the movement. In 1926 the Moorish Science Temple became a legal corporation. By 1928 there were temples in Harlem, Philadelphia, and several southern cities. There were Moorish grocery stores, schools, youth groups, newspapers, and a magazine.

The expansion of the movement made it too difficult for Ali to lead by himself. He turned to certain members for help in administering the organization. A struggle for power erupted between Ali and his Lieutenant Sheikh Claude Greene, resulting in Greene's murder. Although Ali was out of town at the time of the killing, he was accused of the murder and arrested when he returned. While out on bail awaiting trial, Ali died. The circumstances surrounding his death are obscure. Some argue he died as a result of mistreatment during police questioning; others believe Temple members vying for Ali's position had him killed.

Following Ali's death the movement factionalized. Two members claimed to embody Ali's reincarnated

spirit: John Givens El, and W.D. Fard. Fard went on to form the beginnings of the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam, worked with Fard and was appointed First Minister of Islam by the latter. When Fard disappeared in 1934, Muhammad took over the sect. Though members of the Nation of Islam often deny connection with Ali's movement, the two organizations share several principles. For example, Fard studied Ali's methods in order to introduce the Qu'ran to his followers.

When the Moorish Science Temple of America divided after Ali's death, many members joined with Fard and Muhammad in what became the Nation of Islam. Today there are small followings of Ali and the Moorish Science Temple in Hartford, Connecticut and Lexington, Kentucky. In Chicago all that remains is a house with a sign reading Moorish Science Temple.

Scope and Content Note

The Moorish Science Temple of America Collection (1926-67) contains a variety of original items connected with the organization. Accompanying the collection is an itemized list, made by the donor, of the contents of the collection.

The collection contains several legal documents regarding the official registration of the Moorish Science Temple of America as a corporation. There are three original examples of the "*Divine Constitution*," and two original seals. Blank examples of a marriage certificate and an identification card are also included. The "Nationality and Identification" cards were essential as they symbolized a member's new ethnic identity. In 1928, Ali had to warn members against accosting white people and flashing their cards. Members felt so empowered by the cards that they believed they were free from oppression.

There are pamphlets and printed material which include writings by Ali, copies of the magazine: "*The Moorish Voice*," and clippings related to the Moorish Science Temple of America. There are several issues of "*The Moorish Guide*" and "*The Moorish Review*" (1928-56), both originals and photocopies, along with programs from annual conventions (1930-65). The collection includes two original posters publicizing the movement's First Annual Convention (1928), and a message from Ali.

Key Terms

Subjects

African Americans -- Religion
Islam -- 20th century
Muslims -- United States
Muslims, Black -- United States -- Societies, etc

Names

Moorish Science Temple of America
Ali, Noble Drew, 1886-

Container List

- b. 1 The Moorish Science Temple Of America
- b. 1 f. 1 List of Items n.d.
- b. 1 f. 2 Certificates and Documents 1926-66
- b. 1 f. 3 Pamphlets and Printed Material 1928-66
- b. 1 f. 4 Annual Convention Programs 1930-65
- b. 1 f. 5 NewsPapers, and Posters 1928-56, 1928
(Located in Certificate Drawer)