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Imams of the So-Called
“Extremist” Shiites

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Malcolm X and the Twelve Imams of the So-Called “Extremist” Shiites

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Abstract

This study argues that: 1) the people involved in Malcolm X’s transition from the Nation of Islam to so-called orthodox Islam were not all Sunnis; 2) the Twelve Imams played a role in the doctrines of the Nation of Islam as conceived by its founder, W.D. Fard, and 3) people like Moḥammad Taki Mehdi, a Twelver Shiite, and Warith Deen Moḥammed, a Sunni, helped Malcolm X transition to a more mainstream form of Islam.

Keywords

Malcolm X; Shabazz, Malik; Muḥammad, Elijah; Fard, W.D.; al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali; Karbala; Ashura; Twelve Imams; Ghulāt Shiism

Introduction

Malcolm X (1925-1965), also known as Malik el-Shabazz, is an important figure in the Western world of Islam; a man whose legacy is credited with bringing millions of people to so-called orthodox Islam. That “orthodox” Islam is often but erroneously assumed to be solely Sunnism. As I demonstrated in “Malcolm X and Moḥammad Mehdi: the Shi’a Connection,” a peer-reviewed article that appeared in JSIS in 2012, the people involved in Malcolm X’s transition from the Nation of Islam to mainstream Islam were not all Sunnis. In fact, one of the players in this process was an Iraqi Shiite sayyid of Persian ancestry by the name of Moḥammad Taki Mehdi (1928-1998 CE).¹

An Arab and Muslim leader, Mehdi’s socio-political and religious activism appears to have been partially fueled by the message of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali (626-680 CE), the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad (c. 570-632 CE), and the tragedy of Karbala. As much as Mehdi spoke about Shiism, Karbala, Ashura, al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali, and the Twelve Imams, these movements, events, and figures were not novel to Malcolm X. On the contrary, he had been learning about them for over a decade. The Twelve Imams played a role in the doctrines of the Nation of Islam as conceived by its founder, W.D. Fard -- who professed to be a Prophet, the Mahdi, and Allah in Person -- as well as his student and successor, Elijah Muḥammad (1897-1975 CE), who was reportedly appointed by “Allah,”

¹ John Andrew Morrow, “Malcolm X and Mohammad Mehdi: The Shi’a Connection?” *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* 5.1 (2012): 5-24.

namely, W.D. Fard, as his Final Prophet and Messenger.

As this study will demonstrate, Malcolm X’s knowledge of Shiite Islam and the Twelve Imams predates his contact with Mehdi which commenced in 1958. He was immersed in the Ghulāt-influenced Shiite teachings of the Nation of Islam from the time he joined the movement in 1948 until he publicly broke from Elijah Muḥammad on March 8, 1964. People like Mehdi and Warith Deen Moḥammed (1933-2008 CE) helped draw Malcolm X to a more mainstream version of Islam.

Malcolm X completed a pilgrimage to the Mosque of Imam al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali, in Cairo, Egypt, which is said to contain his head, precisely six months before he laid down his life emulating, in the minds of some Shiites, the example of the third Shiite Imam. It could be argued that the visit had little impact upon him. The fact that he recorded it seems to suggest otherwise. When composing diaries, people tend to include what is noteworthy and memorable. As he noted in his *Diary* on Friday, August 21, 1964, he “went to Hussein Mosque (in Khan Khalid & Abra for Juma prayers).”² Later that evening, he mentioned that “[a]t the Hussein Mosque earlier in the day they showed me all the ancient treasures, including a strand of the Prophet’s hair that they have there, also the tomb of Hussein.”³

In “Malcolm X and Moḥammed Mehdi: the Shi‘a Connection,” I suggested that Malcolm X was influenced by Twelver Shiite Islam and inspired by the message of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali through the intermediary of Moḥammed Taki Mehdi.⁴ Although the original article was well-received, and cited by several writers and scholars, it relied primarily on secondary evidence, namely, the testimony of Mehdi’s former wife, Beverlee, and one of his daughters, Anisa. In this short study, I provide first-hand information, drawn directly from Malcolm X, that testifies to the fact that he was familiar with so-called orthodox, heterodox, and heretical expressions of Shiite Islam and that he invoked the Twelve Imams from *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Household and Progeny of the Holy Prophet Muḥammad, in their so-called Ghulāt Shiite conception, in both his speeches and autobiographical writings.

Moḥammad Taki Mehdi: the Twelver Shiite Mentor of Malcolm X

Although Malcolm X was introduced to mainstream Islam by many people -- including Warith Deen Moḥammed, the son of Elijah , Jamil Diab, and Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi, the director of the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States and Canada, among others -- he was also inspired by Moḥammad Taki Mehdi (1928-1998 CE).

Born in Karbala, Iraq, to a family of Persian ancestry that reportedly descended from the Prophet Muḥammad, Mehdi immigrated to the United States where he completed a BA, MA, and a PhD in Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley. Not only was he one of the earliest pro-Palestinian activists, who founded the Action Committee on American-Arab Relations, he was also a Muslim leader who played a role in creating the National Council on Islamic Affairs.

² Malcolm X, *The Diary of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1964.*, ed. Herb Boyd and Ilyasah Al-Shabazz (Chicago: Third World Press), 110.

³ Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 110.

⁴ Morrow, “Malcolm X,” 5-24.

Since Mehdi was committed to the African American struggle for civil and human rights, he used to cross paths with Malcolm X, the spokesman for the Nation of Islam, at various events. After first meeting in 1958, both men became friends and socially committed colleagues. Not only did Mehdi act as a religious and political advisor to Malcolm X, he also made the arrangements for his life-altering pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964.⁵

Like many Arabs and Muslims of the time, Mehdi promoted Arab nationalism, Islamic unity, and religious pluralism. “As Muslims,” he stated, “we respect Judaism and the Jewish people as *Ahl al-Kitab*, the People of the Book.”⁶ Refusing to be blinded by anti-Jewish sentiments, he stressed that “We object to the apartheid policies of the Zionist state of Israel.”⁷ As Richard H. Curtiss noted, Mehdi was dedicated to “unity and cooperation across sectarian lines within Islam, and with Christian and Jewish peace activists.”⁸

Mehdi was a promoter of what he understood to be the message of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali. In fact, he was constantly conveying the tragedy of Karbala to anyone and everyone who was willing to listen. He was opposed to both white supremacy and Zionism.⁹ He faced threats, intimidation, physical assaults, and attempts on his life; however, he stood by his political beliefs.¹⁰

While there is no recorded evidence as to what Mehdi communicated to Malcolm X, Beverlee Tuner, who was married to the former from 1953 to 1980, stated that her husband always insisted that he was a Shiite and that he was always sharing the story of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali with everyone he met.¹¹ She was convinced that her former husband had spoken to Malcolm X about al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali and the Tragedy of Karbala.

Summarizing my findings on the Shiite connection between Malcolm X and Moḥammad Mehdi, without providing credit of any kind, Jonathan Azaziah had this to say:

Most remarkably of all, the Iraqi revolutionary told Malcolm of Imam Hussein and his sacrifice in Karbala often. What the Master of Martyrs endured on Ashura deeply impacted Malcolm, according to those closest to M.T. For years, biographers, researchers and supporters of Hajj Malik wondered why that despite him being fully cognizant of the target painted on his back by the FBI, the ADL and their proxies within the NOI, he still loosened his security detail, told his bodyguards to disarm, and invited his wife and children to what would be his final speech in the Audubon

⁵ Morrow, 14.

⁶ Richard H. Curtis, “Dr. Mohammad T. Mehdi (1928-1998),” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (April 1988: 82-83), accessed 7 July 2011, <https://www.wrmea.org/1998-april/in-memoriam-dr.-mohammad-t.-mehdi-1928-1998.html>

⁷ Curtis.

⁸ Curtis.

⁹ Mohammad T. Mehdi, *Peace in Palestine* (New York: New World Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Morrow, 11.

¹¹ Morrow, 19.

Ballroom even with the dangers at hand. And yet none of these personalities ever delved into Malcolm’s connection, friendship and brotherhood with Dr. Mehdi.

This is it, right here. Why was Malcolm so seemingly “care-free” in his last days? Because like Imam Hussein, Malcolm X embraced his destiny as a martyr and walked into the light emanating from it with love and dignity. Indeed, like the Karbala 72 themselves, he did not cower in the face of the conspiracy seeking to destroy him for he knew his blood would give rise to millions like him after he perished.

While we cannot say for certain that Hajj Malik died as a Shi’a, what we can attest to, unequivocally, is that Shi’a Islam, through Dr. Moḥammad Taki Mehdi, changed the man born as Malcolm Little forever. We can also say -- unequivocally as well I might add -- that Malcolm X would not have become such a global force if it weren’t for the bespectacled Iraqi Shi’a revolutionary from NYC that humbly and quietly assisted him to break free from the NOI’s shackles, so he could enter into the abode of true Islam.

Moreover, it is hardly the point to ponder about what Islamic school of thought Malcolm belonged to, not to mention insulting to both his memory and M.T.’s for that matter. Instead, what should be concluded and joyously celebrated about the link between Hajj Malik and Dr. Mehdi is that just as Hajj Malik represents, to all of us, a heroic figure of anti-colonialism, Black nationalism, anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism and Islamic Liberation Theology, he also represents beautiful Islamic unity. For he is a revolutionary spirit and a living energy of goodness, justice and truth birthed by the intersection of Sunni Islam and Shi’a Islam.¹²

Malcolm X was indeed influenced by mainstream Twelver Shiism and the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali. His knowledge of so-called Ghulāt Twelver Shiite beliefs, practices, and personalities, however, predates his contact with Moḥammad Taki Mehdi. In fact, he learned them from his teacher, the Honorable Elijah Muḥammad, both in prison, from 1948 to 1952, by means of correspondence, and in person, between 1952 and 1964. As for Elijah Muḥammad (1897-1975 CE), he learned so-called Ghulāt Twelver Shiite teachings from his teacher, W.D. Fard, the enigmatic spiritual master who took him as a disciple between 1931 and 1934 after which point, he disappeared, leaving few traces, suggesting he adopted yet another identity, left the country permanently, or passed away shortly thereafter.

The Ghulāt or So-Called Extremist Shiites

The Ghulāt, an Arabic word for theological “Exaggerators” or “Extremists,” is a term applied by Twelver Shiite scholars to describe minority, self-identified Shiite groups, who hold beliefs that the majority group deems to be deviant, including, but not limited to:

¹² Jonathan Azaziah, “The Brotherhood Between Malcolm X and Dr. Mohammad Taki Mehdi: How Shi’a Islam Changed Malcolm X Forever,” *Uprooted Palestinian* (May 19, 2017), accessed 14 March 2018, <http://uprootedpalestinians.blogspot.com/2017/05/the-brotherhood-between-malcolm-x-ra.html>.

- * the belief that the Imams form part of the Godhead, for example, the Trinity of Muḥammad, ‘Ali, and Salman al-Farsi or other variations such as Allah, Muḥammad and ‘Ali or Haqq-Muḥammad-‘Ali;
- * the belief in the divinity of the Imams, namely, the claim that God incarnates in human form (*ḥulūl*), namely, in the body of the Imams and that the Imams were the literal manifestations of God;
- * the belief that the Imams created and/or control the universe directly or by delegation;
- * the belief that the Imams have knowledge of the unseen without having received such knowledge from Allah;
- * the belief in metempsychosis (*tanasukh*); the belief that the Imams do not die;
- * the belief that the Imams are superior to the Prophet; and the belief that Islamic law and the avoidance of sins is not obligatory upon those who believe in the Imams.

Besides criticizing the Ghulāt for failing to fulfil orthodox religious obligations, Twelver Shiite scholars condemn them for equating ‘Ali, and the other Imams, with Allah; granting them the Attributes of Allah, and invoking them in worship as opposed to calling upon them for intercession.

In response to Twelver Shiite allegations, the Ghulāt groups in question, who view themselves as true believers, true Muslims, and true Shiites, and who describe themselves as ‘Alawi, Nusayri, Qizilbash, Ahl-i Haqq, ‘Ali Ilahi, Çepni, Takhtaji, Shabak, Bajwan, Ibrahimiyah, Safawiyah, Sarliyyah-Kakaiyyah, among many other names, accuse Twelver Shiites of being *muqassirin*, namely, “those who fall short (in truth faith by failing to recognize the divinity of the Imams).”

There is also a strong Ghulāt current in Sevener Isma‘ili Shiism that produced off-shoots like the Druze in the same fashion that Twelver Shiism spawned the semi-Ghulāt Shaykhis and the Babis who influenced the Bahā’i faith. For some Twelver Shiite scholars, groups like the Alevis and the Bektashis are fully-fledged Ghulāt or heretics. For others, however, they would be categorized as semi-Ghulāt or heterodox, a term used by Farhad Daftary, S.H.M. Jafri, and myself to describe groups that exaggerate the status of the Twelve Imams, granting them supernatural and superhuman qualities, while falling short of deifying them.¹³ Others would disagree with the classification of “semi-Ghulāt” and describe such groups as being especially zealous in their Imamology. After all, such views are not uncommon among certain Twelver Shiites.

¹³ Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 88; S.H.M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi‘a Islam*, accessed 18 March 2020, 177, 209-211, <https://samensterk.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/shm-jafri-the-origins-early-development-of-shiaa-islam.pdf>; John Andrew Morrow, *Restoring the Balance: Using the Qur’an and Sunnah to Guide a Return to the Prophet’s Islam*, Newcastle upon Tyne: 2016, 43.

The so-called Ghulāt belong to many different racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups. The extant groups are mostly found in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Albania, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, as well as other countries in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Despite this diversity, the so-called Extremist Shiites, a name they never use for themselves, share the same core beliefs. The so-called Ghulāt have been the subject of many scholarly studies, the most notable of which include *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulāt Sects* by Matti Moosa, *Controversies in Formative Shi‘i Islam: The Ghulāt Muslims* by Mushegh Asatryan, *The Nusayri-Alawi Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy* by Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, as well as *The Nusayri-‘Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* by Yaron Friedman.¹⁴

Malcolm X and the Twelve Imams of the So-Called Extremist Shiites

Malcolm X believed in the Twelve Imams of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites. He lectured about them in his speeches. These Twelve Imams formed part of the teachings that he imparted as a minister in the Nation of Islam. He learned about the Twelve Imams of the so-called Extremist Shiites from Elijah Muḥammad who, in turn, had learned about them from Master W.D. Fard.

As I argue in *Finding W.D. Fard: Unveiling the Identity of the Founder of the Nation of Islam*, this fascinating figure of Asian origin appears to have come from a so-called Extremist Shiite background or picked up Ghulāt teachings in the United States and used them in his theology in a syncretic fashion as he did with the ideas from other religious groups. Either way, he shared the central tenets of the Ghulāt Shiites, teachings that he transmitted to his disciple, Elijah Muḥammad who, in turn, passed them down to Malcolm X.

In 1958, Malcolm X gave a speech in which he mentioned the Twelve Imams of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites. He explained that “when Joseph saw twelve stars that emerged into one this was a symbol of the Twelve Islam Leaders of the East coming to Elijah Muḥammad for leadership.”¹⁵ In other words, Elijah Muḥammad was the leader of the Twelve Imams. And, like the Twelve Imams themselves, W.D. Fard, Elijah Muḥammad, and Malcolm X cited the Bible to support their theological claims. In 1959, Malcolm X stated the following at a Nation of Islam meeting:

In Mecca there is a group of 24 men who are known as gods. These gods have great wisdom and they are dependent on each other. These men are men like us and they die like we do, but a son is always trained to take the place of his father and he is also trained not to reveal the secret. It is known that someday a son would be born to one of these 24 men and he would be much wiser than they are. This one would be the supreme God. This son has been born and is known as W.F. Muḥammad. This name should not be mistaken for Elijah Muḥammad who was born in Georgia. W.F.

¹⁴ Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulāt Sects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988); Mushegh Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shi‘i Islam: The Ghulāt Muslims* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Nusayri-Alawi Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-‘Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

¹⁵ W.D. Fard, *FBI File*, 4 / 00178 / 652.

Muhammad was born in Mecca and he came to raise up the last nation of Islam from this wilderness and to punish those who are responsible for these conditions.¹⁶

Malcolm also affirmed that “Allah is a living human being -- God -- the 25th wise man who came to this country to teach Elijah Muhammad.”¹⁷

In December of 1962, shortly before Christmas, Malcolm X delivered a particularly virulent anti-white speech at Harlem’s Nation of Islam Mosque No. 7.¹⁸ The title of the speech was “Black Man’s History.” As Malcolm X explained, the Twelve Major Imams and the Twelve Minor Imams were at the heart of Nation of Islam theology and were a part and parcel of Afro-centric cosmology:

On this earth there are wise black men who can tune in and tell what’s going to happen in the future just as clear... as they can see in the past... And they sit down and write history to last 25,000 years. After this history expires, they put it in a vault in the Holy City, Mecca, and write a new history. This has been going on and on and on. So, in the year one of the cycle in which we now live... there are Twenty-Four Wise Men. They’re spoken of in the Bible as Twenty-Four Elders or Twenty-Four Prophets or Twenty-Four Scientists or Twenty-Four Imams. Twelve of them are Major and Twelve of them are Minor... These Twenty-Three men are called together by this one, which makes twenty-four. And these Twenty-Four, these Twenty-Three presided over by the Twenty-Fourth, are spoken of in the Book of Revelation where John said he had a vision in heaven where there was a throne, and around the throne were twenty-four elders. These Twenty-Four Elders are called Angels. They are Twenty-Four Wise Black Men who live right here on this Earth, but no one knows who they are.

At the end of every 25,000 years this one calls all of them into conference, and they sit down at the Holy City, Mecca, and he informs them that the history of the past 25,000 years has expired and it’s time to write a new history. So, these Twenty-Four, these Scientists, begin to tune in on the population of the planet Earth... These twenty-four Scientists begin to tune in, they look down through the wheel of time. They can tell not only what the people on this Earth are thinking, but they can tell what their children are thinking, what the unborn children’s children are thinking, what the unborn children’s children’s children are thinking. They can look right down through the wheel of time and tell minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month, year-by-year, for 25,000 years exactly what is going to take place.¹⁹

¹⁶ Malcolm X, *FBI File*, 154 / 39, accessed 1 April 2020, <https://vault.fbi.gov/malcolm-little-malcolm-x/malcolm-little-malcolm-x-hq-file-04-of-27/view>.

¹⁷ Malcolm X, *FBI File*, 152 / 37.

¹⁸ Christopher Buck, *God & Apple Pie: Religious Myths and Visions of America* (Kingston, NY: Educator’s Press, 2015), 215.

¹⁹ Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches* (New York: Arcade, 2011), no page; John Andrew Morrow, *Finding W.D. Fard: Unveiling the Identity of the Founder of the Nation of Islam* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 85.

The Twelve Major Imams and the Twelve Minor Imams also appear in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Summarizing the theology of the Nation of Islam, he wrote that:

Elijah Muḥammad teaches that... the first humans, Original Man, were a black people. They founded the Holy City of Mecca. Among this black race were Twenty-Four Wise Scientists. One of the Scientists... created the especially strong black tribe of Shabazz, from which America’s Negroes, so-called, descend. (164)

Elijah Muḥammad teaches that the greatest and mightiest God who appeared on the earth was Master W.D. Fard. He came from the East to the West, appearing in North America at a time when the history and the prophecy that is written was coming to realization, as the non-white people all over the world began to rise, and as the devil white civilization, condemned by Allah, was, through its devilish nature, destroying itself.²⁰

Malcolm X taught Nation of Islam theology for fifteen years. His classes and lectures included lessons on the Twelve Divine Imams. The citations above support this point. Unfortunately, only a small number of Malcolm’s speeches were recorded and only a small number of his written sermons, lectures, and articles have survived. If one thing is clear, it is that Malcolm X transmitted the teachings of Elijah Muḥammad regarding the Twelve Imams.

Fortunately, a large number of Elijah Muḥammad’s speeches were recorded, and an impressive body of his writings have been printed in newspapers and books. If there is any doubt as to what Malcolm X was really talking about in the above-mentioned quotations, it evaporates when we examine the source of his teachings on the Twelve Imams: the Honorable Elijah Muḥammad, the final Messenger of Allah according to the Nation of Islam.

Elijah Muḥammad and the Twelve Imams of the So-Called Extremist Shiites

The belief in the Twelve Imams of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites was taught to Malcolm X by Elijah Muḥammad. In the *Supreme Wisdom*, Elijah Muḥammad explained that “There are 12 tribes, the 12 Imams is the real answer. Allah said that WE ONCE HAD 13 TRIBES, but one got lost.”²¹ As Elijah Muḥammad learned from Master W.D. Fard,

The knowledge of God has been kept a secret by Twelve Men on our planet for many thousands of years. The Twelve pass their knowledge on from son to son, but the number possessing this knowledge is never more than twelve; and they are not to ever reveal it.²²

The belief that the exoteric and esoteric teachings of Islam were transmitted to the Imams via *nass* or

²⁰ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 167.

²¹ Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom: Solutions to the So-Called Negroes Problems*, vol. 1, (Phoenix: Elijah Muhammad Books, 2008), 25.

²² Elijah Muhammad, *Our Savior Has Arrived* (Phoenix: Memp Publications, 1996), 64; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 80.

appointment, light upon light, forms part of Sevener, Twelver, and so-called Ghulāt Shiite teachings. According to Elijah Muḥammad, the Council of the Twelve Imams gathered to discuss the fate and ultimate destiny of the war-mongering and irredeemable white race:

Twelve Leaders from all over the Planet had a conference in the Holy City of Mecca, Arabia, over the Lost-Found Nation (the so-called Negroes) in the wilderness (America) who must return to their own. These Leaders agreed that the devils (the American white race) are disagreeable to live with in peace and have decided to remove them from the Planet Earth. I will agree with the Scientists, for we have tried to live with them in peace, even up to this very minute (400 years) and they yet show the world that they do not want any peace with any black people.²³

As Elijah Muḥammad explains, the Imams were not bound by space and time. They were not merely historical figures who lived from the seventh century until the ninth century. They were both transcendent and immanent. According to Elijah Muḥammad, the Imams were watching over Moses when he tried, in vain, to reform the race of genetically altered white devils that had been created by Yakub, a mad scientist. Speaking of Yakub’s creation, he related that:

Once they gave Moses so much trouble that he took a few sticks of dynamite, went up on the mountainside, placed them into the ground, and went back to get those who were giving him the most trouble. He said to them: “Stand there on the edge of this mountain and you will hear the voice of God.” They stood there about 300 in number. Moses set the fuse off and it killed all of them.

The Imams got after Moses for performing this trick on the devils. Moses said to the Imams: “If you only know how much trouble these devils give me, you would do as I do...” The Imams recognized the tremendous job Musa (Moses) had, trying to civilize the savages. Those enemies of the righteous black nation on earth now had to take the place as the rulers and conquerors of the earth.²⁴

Elijah Muḥammad’s claim that the Twelve Imams were physically present at the time of Moses was not the product of personal fantasy. It was rooted in the Ghulāt Shiite exegesis of a particular Qur’anic verse: “And you, [O Muḥammad], were not on the western side [of the mount] when We revealed to Moses the command, and you were not among the witnesses [to that]” (28:44). The Ghulāt Shiites believe that Imam ‘Ali spoke to Moses via the Burning Bush. “Some extremist Shiites,” explains Matti Moosa, “believe that... ‘Ali is the one who spoke through Moses and the prophets.”²⁵

As Elijah Muḥammad explained, relying on the teachings he had received from Master W.D. Fard, the Twelve Imams existed prior to Yakub’s creation: “Jacob made, according to the Bible, 12 sons.

²³ Elijah Muhammad, *The Genesis Years: Unpublished and Rare Writings of Elijah Muhammad, Messenger of Allah (1959-1962)*, 2 vols (Maryland Heights, MO: MEMPS, 2003) 138; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 80-81.

²⁴ Elijah Muhammad, *The True History of Elijah Muhammad*, Ed. Nasir Makr Hakim (Phoenix: Memps Publications, 2008), 160; qtd. Morrow, *Finding W.D. Fard*, 81.

²⁵ Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, 422.

Actually, Jacob could not produce the 12 Scientists. The 12 Scientists were already here.”²⁶ The Imams even take precedence over the prophets of God. In fact, as Elijah Muḥammad explained, the messengers of God were appointed by the Twelve Imams:

I will not go out in the street and sit on the curb stone with my brother. I won’t boast that I’m greater than him, because he was created like me and he have the brains like me, which came with the creation and he can make that brain do just what I’m doing if the Will of the power of the 12 Scientists of the God with him. He can do just what I’m doing. When a Messenger is chosen, they go and [confer] with these 12 to see if whether or not they can do the job for which’s he’s now chosen. The 12 Gods, they decide on all this. We call them the 12 Great Scientists. This is why your ruler was made with 12 inches. It’s after the number of the 12 Major Scientists, and without this you cannot live. That’s why we call it a ruler when you have 12 square inches in it.²⁷

The fact that Elijah Muḥammad spoke of Twelve Imams and Twelve Great Scientists is telling. Traditions in Kulayni’s *al-Kaḥfī*, one of the major sources of traditions for Twelver Shiites, cite the Prophet Muḥammad as saying both “The world cannot exist without an Imam” and “The world cannot exist without an *‘Alim*,” namely, a Scholar or a Scientist.²⁸ Since Elijah Muḥammad was not proficient in Arabic, this suggests that his teacher, W.D. Fard, was familiar with the Arabic language and with the traditions in question which equate the *a’immah* or Imams with the *‘ulama’* or Scientists. If the world cannot exist without an Imam, argue the Seveners, the Twelvers, and the Ghulāt, then the Imams existed before the Prophet Muḥammad although some Twelvers might counter that the *‘alim* prior to the Prophet was not necessarily one of the Twelve Imams. For the so-called Extremist Shiites, every exoteric prophet was accompanied by an esoteric Imam.

As Elijah Muḥammad explained, Yakub grafted the so-called devil white race, through a process of unnatural selection and selective breeding on the island of Pelan. The Twelve Imams came to realize that whites could never coexist peacefully with blacks. As much as they sent prophets and messengers to try to guide the white race, they were met, time and again, with abject failure. Moses failed, Jesus failed, and Muḥammad failed. Evil by nature, W.D. Fard and Elijah Muḥammad taught, the whites simply could not be reformed.

After observing the plight of black Americans, and the wickedness of the whites who enslaved, segregated, and oppressed them, “the Twelve Scientists met to confer over the possibility of returning us [African Americans], the lost-found in the wilderness of North America, to our own.”²⁹ As far as Elijah Muḥammad was concerned,

The black nation is only fooling themselves to take the Caucasian race otherwise. This is what Jesus learned of their history, before he gave up his work of trying to convert

²⁶ Elijah Muhammad. *Yakub (Jacob): The Father of Mankind* (Phoenix: MEMPS, 2008), 28.

²⁷ Muhammad, *The True History*, 33-34; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 82.

²⁸ Kulayni, *al-Kaḥfī*, 8 volumes, trans. Muḥammad Sarwar (New York: Islamic Seminary, 2015).

²⁹ Muhammad, *The True History*, 188; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 82.

the Jews or white race to the religion of Islam.

And, the same knowledge of them was given to Muḥammad by the Imams (or Scientists) of Mecca. That is why the war of the Muslims against them came to a stop. Muḥammad was told that he could not reform the devils and that the race had 1,400 more years to live; the only way to make righteous people (Muslims) out of them was to graft them back into the black nation.

This grieved Muḥammad so much that it caused him heart trouble until his death (age sixty-two and one-half years. The Old Scientists used to laugh at Muḥammad for thinking that he could convert them (the devils) to Islam. This hurt his heart. He [Muḥammad] gets the name (Praised) from the honor of the Twenty-Four Elders or Islamic Scientists.³⁰

Master W.D. Fard was therefore sent from the East to the West by the Twelve Imams of the so-called Extremist Shiites in order to guide the Lost-Found Nation of Islam and bring black Muslims back to their ancestral homeland in Asia and, if that were not possible, Elijah Muḥammad would call for the creation of a black Asiatic homeland in the Americas where believers would await the wrath of Allah upon the white man.

Although Elijah Muḥammad described his teachings as a “New Islam” it was, to a certain extent, “Old Ghulāt Shiism” that was adapted to an African American context and which drew from disparate ideological influences. Just like the Ghulāt, however, Elijah Muḥammad’s teachings placed the historical Prophet Muḥammad at a level that was inferior or subservient to that of the Twelve Imams. This coincides with the ‘Alawi-Nusayri creed, namely, the beliefs of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites from Syria. As Matti Moosa explains,

Muḥammad has no lord but ‘Ali. As the creature of ‘Ali, Muḥammad cannot be homologous with ‘Ali in his divinity. He must (and does) occupy an inferior position in the trinity of the Nusayris, as is clear from the Nusayri catechism, which charges Muḥammad with the duty of calling the believers to the knowledge of their Lord ‘Ali.³¹

As further evidence of the so-called Extremist Shiite origins of the Nation of Islam, a high-ranking figure in the Nation of Islam reported in 1964 that W.D. Fard had left behind books before he disappeared: works that revealed that he had been sent to the West by “the Twelve Men of Mecca,” namely, the Twelve Imams themselves.³² During the same year, Elijah Muḥammad claimed that his teacher, W.D. Fard, had returned to “Twelve Men of Mecca.”³³ The mission of Master W.D. Fard therefore begins and ends with the Twelve Imams of the so-called Extremist Shiites.

³⁰ Muhammad, *The True History*, 195; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 82.

³¹ Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, 322; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 83.

³² *WD Fard FBI file 5 / 749*; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 83.

³³ *WD Fard FBI file 5 / 00275 / 749*; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 83.

Tynetta Muḥammad (1941-2015), a secretary and secret wife (or mistress, depending on one’s perspective) of Elijah Muḥammad, who only revealed her role after his passing, shared many of the lessons that she had learned from her husband and prophet. They include the belief that:

[T]wo major groups of angelic hosts ... are working with God in the Judgment. He identified One group of the angelic hosts as being seven in number who perform a particular function in relationship to the elements of our earth and its atmosphere. The Second Group’s numbers is 12. They are identified as the Twelve Major Scientists, who know the Secret of God’s Divine Being. He further stated that he was in the Circle of the Twelve and the Seven.³⁴

If we study the spectrum of Islam, the only groups that believe in the divine pre-existence of the Imams are the Shaykhis and certain Twelver Shiites who hold that the Imams have some control over the universe by the permission of God.³⁵ Although the self-described theologically moderate and mainstream Sevener and Twelver Shiites believe that God created Muḥammad, Fāṭimah, ‘Ali, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, and the rest of the Imams, prior to creating the world, they do not believe that they are supernatural entities that control the universe.

Had Elijah Muḥammad spoken solely of Twelve Imams, Scientists or Leaders, one could have spoken of a traditional Twelver Shiite influence on the teachings of the Nation of Islam. Considering that he described them explicitly as “God-Scientists,” namely, Divine Leaders, in the literal sense, the so-called Extremist Shiite implications appear to be inescapable.

According to the teachings of W.D. Fard, the historical Prophet Muḥammad, like Moses before him, tried to reform the white race. Knowledge of their supposedly diabolic nature, however, was “given to Muḥammad by the Imams (or Scientists) of Mecca” (Hakim): “[t]he ‘Imams (or Scientists) of Mecca’ made it clear to Muḥammad that he could not convert the white race.”³⁶ Elijah Muḥammad also asserted that Master W.D. Fard was superior to them:

The Twelve Major Imams, as they are called in Islam or in the Arab language, they don’t have this one’s knowledge [ie. Fard]. This one [Fard] has a superior knowledge and that the other Twelve Minor or the Twenty-Four Elders, as you find them in the last of the book here, casting down their crown to that One that is conquering the best and is delivering people from that beast.³⁷

“In the *Theology of Time*,” notes Michael Lieb, “Elijah Muḥammad describes himself as a ‘Messenger’ who acts in accordance with the ‘Twelve Scientists of God.’ He declares that he is ‘the Last Scientist or Prophet.’”³⁸ Elijah Muḥammad even asserted that he was the pole around which the Twelve Imams

³⁴ Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Vol. 2., The African American Islamic Renaissance, 1920-1975* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 642, note 231; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 83.

³⁵ Morrow, *Finding*, 83.

³⁶ Herbert Berg. *Elijah Muhammad* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), 62; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 84.

³⁷ Muhammad, *The True History*, 24; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 84.

³⁸ Michael Lieb. *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time* (Durham, NC: Duke

circumambulated, namely, he was the sun around which they orbited. He was, in his own words, the New Qiblah or direction of prayer and the Real Muḥammad:

I’m Elijah of your Bible, I’m Muḥammad of your Holy Qur’an. Not the Muḥammad that was here 1400 years ago, I am the one that the Holy Qur’an is referring to. The Muḥammad that was here 1400 years ago was a white man; then they put up a sign of the real Muḥammad. It’s there in Mecca Arabia, they call it the little black stone.³⁹

Since he was, in his mind, the *real* Prophet Muḥammad, Elijah Muḥammad claimed that he had more knowledge than both the Antichrist and the Imams. In his words: “The Lamb is here opening that which the Beast nor even the Scientist of heaven has ever known -- not even the 24 Scientists who wrote our history.”⁴⁰

Elijah Muḥammad claimed that “[t]here’s very little of God’s creation that He has not taught me something about it, because He put me as His second self, that’s what I am. I’m the second self of God Almighty.”⁴¹ This resembles traditions attributed to the Twelve Imams in which they claim to have knowledge of the unseen. It also evokes Ghulāt and semi-Ghulāt Shiite art in which ‘Ali and Allah are treated as mirrors of one another. Elijah Muḥammad, if we are to believe him, was the Face of Allah.

Like al-Ḥallāj (c. 858-922), the Persian Sufi mystic, poet, and teacher, who proclaimed that “I am the Truth,” and who was condemned to death for heresy, Elijah Muḥammad stated that he had reached a state of divine union with the Divinity. In one particularly euphoric moment, he proclaimed that “Allah has taken over the Messenger’s heart, mind, and brain, and Allah is making them react according to His Will... The Apostle is considered one in Allah and Allah is one in the Apostle.”⁴² In other words, his human side, his self, and his ego, had disappeared. He had dissolved into the Divine, namely, nothing remained but God.

As Antony B. Pinn explains, the Imams were not men: they were God-Scientists, namely, divinities who wrote human history.⁴³ Master Fard Muḥammad, however, had the distinction of being Allah Himself, the Supreme Twenty-Fourth Scientist.⁴⁴ In other words, he is the God that will bring judgment to the white man. As Elijah Muḥammad expounded,

We make history every 25,000 years. When such history is written, it is done by twenty-four of our Scientists. One acts as judge or God for the others and twenty-three

University Press, 1998), 281, note 8; Elijah Muhammad, *Theology of Time* (Phoenix: Memps Publications, 2008) 6; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 84.

³⁹ Muhammad, *The True History*, 223; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 85.

⁴⁰ Muhammad, *The True History*, 296; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 85.

⁴¹ Muhammad, *The True History*, 248; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 85.

⁴² Muhammad, *The True History*, 252; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 85.

⁴³ Antony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 135; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 87.

⁴⁴ Pinn, *Varieties*, 135; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 87.

actually do the work of getting up the future of the nation... The original black nation used 23 Scientists to write the future of that nation for the next 25,000 years, and the 24th is the judge or the one God, Allah.⁴⁵

On February 26, 1974, as part of his Savior’s Day address, Elijah Muḥammad asserted that:

This date is taken from the beginning of the present CYCLE OF WORLD HISTORY WRITINGS BY 24 BLACK SCIENTISTS of which only 23 actually do the writing, and the 24th one acts as judge of the writings of the other 23. This takes place once every 25,000 years. In this history is written everything that will come to pass for the next 25,000 years.⁴⁶

According to the teachings of W.D. Fard, as transmitted by Elijah Muḥammad, the race of white devils was created by the Council of Twenty-Four God-Scientists or Imams:

Six thousand years ago, or to be more exact, 6,600 years ago, as Allah taught me, our nation gave birth to another god whose name was Yakub. He started studying the life germ of man to try and make a new creation (new man) which our twenty-four Scientists had foretold eight thousand four hundred years before the birth of Mr. Yakub; and the Scientists were aware of his birth, before he was born, as they are today of the intentions or ideas of the present world.⁴⁷

These Twenty-Four Divine Scientists include Twelve Major and Twelve Minor Imams. As Anthony B. Pinn elucidates,

Master Fard Muḥammad is Supreme Deity during our current twenty-five-thousand-year period. Fard is not, however, the ‘First’ who began creation but is Allah, who has the same knowledge as the ‘First’ creator.⁴⁸

The belief in Twenty-Four Imams, Twelve Major and Twelve Minor traces back to the so-called Ghulāt or Extremist Shiites. The ‘Alawi-Nusayris believe in Twelve Imams, Twelves *Naqibs*, Twelve Apostles of Jesus, and Twelve Captains of Israel...⁴⁹ The Ghulāt, the semi-Ghulāt, and other associated groups, such as the Bektashis, the Qizilbash, and the ‘Ali-Ilahis, all exalt the Twelve Imams. As Farhad Daftary notes, the Tayyibi-Isma‘ilis, who are Sevener Shiites, believe in twenty-three absolute missionaries who represent al-Tayyib, the Hidden Imam, during his occultation.⁵⁰

As Elijah Muḥammad related, W.D. Fard revealed to him that “My name is Mahdi; I am God. I came

⁴⁵ James L. Conyers Jr., *Africana Faith: A Religious History of the African American Crusade in Islam* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 358; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 88.

⁴⁶ Muhammad, *Our Savior*, 12; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 88.

⁴⁷ Muhammad, *Our Savior* 19; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 88.

⁴⁸ Pinn, *Varieties*, 146; qtd. Morrow 2019: 88.

⁴⁹ Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, 376; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 80.

⁵⁰ Daftary, 555; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 87.

to guide you into the right path that you may be successful and see the hereafter.”⁵¹ Far from a fabrication of Elijah Muhammad, Master W.D. Fard’s claims of divinity were confirmed in newspaper reports from 1932.⁵² When asked to identify himself, he calmly and confidently informed the Detroit Police Department that he was “the Supreme Being.”⁵³

From the time he arrived in Detroit’s Paradise Valley on July 4, 1930, Master W.D. Fard assumed the role of the God-Imam of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites. He presented himself as a prophet, the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam, and eventually as Allah Himself. After four years of initiating his followers into his esoteric doctrines, which were drawn, in part, from so-called Extremist Shiism, he entered a state of occultation which would reportedly last until he returns to annihilate the white supremacist world order.

W.D. Fard and the Twelve Imams

Far from being the product of his own creative genius, Elijah Muhammad’s teachings on the Twelve Imams seem to have been derived directly and faithfully from his own teacher: the mysterious Asiatic mystic known as W.D. Fard. According to this fascinating, but fleeting, figure from the East, creation was the product of Allah, the “Cosmic Intellect” or the “Black Intellect.”⁵⁴ The Essence of Allah, however, is transcendent and unfathomable.

From this Eternal Blackness, which is Allah, emanated the Divine Council of Twelve Major and Minor Imams, who are also known as Leaders, Scientists, and Gods. These Divine Imams are Black men. They live upon the earth, mingle among the people, and hold meetings in Mecca, but their identity remains hidden. They control all of creation, have knowledge of all things, and write the future in a Guarded Tablet. They are the manifestations and incarnations of Allah: God in Person. The Twelve Imams, as a Divine Council, appear in “The Problem Book” that forms part of W.D. Fard’s *Supreme Wisdom* lessons: “Twelve Leaders of Islam from all over the Planet have conferred in the Root of Civilization concerning the Lost-Found Nation of Islam -- must return to their original Land.”⁵⁵

After reading the citations in question, mainstream Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites, would have a challenging time finding any semblance of so-called Islamic orthodoxy in such teachings. The theology of the W.D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and the Nation of Islam is drawn from a wide variety of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources. It includes elements from Rastafarianism, which surfaced at the same

⁵¹ Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 36; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 22; Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1981), 250; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 66.

⁵² Morrow, *Finding*, 214.

⁵³ Morrow, *Finding*, 214.

⁵⁴ Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop and the Gods of New York*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), no page; Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 181.

⁵⁵ W.D. Fard, *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons*, 1934, accessed 14 March 2018, <http://www.ciphertheory.net/supremewisdom.pdf>; qtd. Morrow, *Finding*, 79.

time as the Nation of Islam, along with Theosophism, Gnosticism, Freemasonry, and Ufology. It also draws from the teachings of the Jehovah Witnesses and apocalyptic Baptists. The unifying factor or the glue that holds all these disparate doctrines together derives from Twelver and Sevener Islam, not in their mainstream forms, but rather, in their so-called Extremist or Ghulāt off-shoots.

According to the dominant view, the belief that the Twelve Imams were Gods has no basis in mainstream Twelver Shiism. They may have been perceived to be godly and godlike but they were not gods. The only people in the Muslim world who view the Twelve Imams as omniscient divinities who govern the world are the so-called Ghulāt or Extremist Shiites. As Shaykh Ṣadūq (d. 991) stated in his *Shiite Creed*:

Our belief concerning those who exceed the bounds of belief (*ghal*, plural *ghulat*) and those who believe in delegation (*al-mufawwida*) is that they are deniers (*kuffar*) of Allah, Glory be to His name. They are more wicked than the Jews, the Christians, the Fire-Worshippers, the Qadarites or the Kharijites (*Haruriyyah*), or any of the heretics (*ahl al-bid'ah*) or those who hold views which lead astray (*al-ahwa'u al-madilla*). None have belittled Allah more, Glory be to Him; as Allah says:

“It is not possible for any human being unto whom Allah has given the scripture and wisdom and the prophethood that he should afterwards have said unto mankind: Be slaves of me instead of Allah; but (what he said was): Be ye faithful servants of the Lord by virtue of your constant teaching of the Scripture and of your constant study thereof” (Qur'an 3:79). “And he commanded you not that ye should take the angels and the prophets for lords. Would he command you to disbelieve after ye had become Muslims?” (Qur'an 3:80)

And He said, Mighty and Glorious is He:

“Do not be excessive in your belief.” (Qur'an 4:171, 5:77)⁵⁶

Despite some of the evidence above, some scholars might still question whether the Twelve Imams and God-Scientists of W.D. Fard are connected to the Twelve Imams of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites. If so, then it is important to pan out and place this belief in the broader context of the teachings of the Nation of Islam as imparted by W.D. Fard to Elijah Muḥammad. As I have detailed in *Finding W.D. Fard: Unveiling the Identity of the Founder of the Nation of Islam*, W.D. Fard taught his followers to believe in Twelve Imams. He taught them that the Imams controlled creation. He taught them that the Imams were Gods. He taught them that there were Twenty-Four Imams in total: Twelve Major Imams and Twelve Minor Imams. As the Nusayri catechism, *Kitāb ta'alīm al-dīniyyah al-nuṣayriyyah* explains, God appeared on earth in human form. For example, God took the form of 'Ali and took the Prophet Muḥammad as his veil.⁵⁷ Likewise, the God-Imam have Veils or Gates. In this context,

⁵⁶ Shaykh Saduq, *A Shiite Creed*, trans. Asaf A.A. Fyzee, Np: Al-Islam.Org, nd, accessed 14 March 2018, <https://www.al-islam.org/a-shiite-creed-shaykh-saduq/denial-excess-and-delegation>

⁵⁷ Morrow, *Finding*, 68.

the Twelve Imams could be viewed as the Major Imams while their Agents would be viewed as the Minor Imams.

W.D. Fard also taught his disciples to believe in cycles of time. He taught them that Heaven and Hell were allegorical. He taught them to believe in reincarnation or the transmigration of souls. He taught them that there were prophets after Muḥammad. He taught them a tripartite profession of faith. And he taught them the belief in a race of infidels, devils, and demons. All of these teachings are similar to those shared by the Ghulāt Shiites with the one difference that the devils, for the so-called Ghulāt, were not a race but rather anyone outside their sect.⁵⁸ After all, W.D. Fard also spoke about black devils and admitted that whites could be Muslims.

In light of this evidence, it could be argued that the teachings of W.D. Fard, Elijah Muḥammad, and the Nation of Islam are a radical Western religious expression of radical Eastern religious ideas: the doctrines shared by the Ghulāt, the semi-Ghulāt, and associated fringe and derivative groups, namely, the Alevi, the Bektashis, the ‘Alawi-Nusayris, the Qizilbash/Kizilbash, the Mufawwidah, the Ahl-i Haqq or ‘Ali-Ilahis, the Çepni or Takhtaji, the Shabak, the Bajwan, the Ibrahimiyah, the Safawiyah, the Sarliyyah-Kakaiyyah, the Druze, the Shaykhis, the Babis, and the Baha’i. If one studies Nation of Islam doctrine with only knowledge of normative or orthodox Islam, the teachings of W.D. Fard, as conveyed by Elijah Muḥammad, do not completely fit the mold. However, if one studies the teachings of the Nation of Islam with a full understanding of so-called Ghulāt Shiism and its associated sects, it seem to fit the pattern relatively well.

Objections and Counter Objections

Critics may claim that the evidence presented does not support the thesis that the Twelve Imams mentioned in the teachings of W.D. Fard, Elijah Muḥammad, and the Nation of Islam are the Twelve Imams of Twelver Shiism. They most certainly are not. They find their theological roots in the Twelve Imams of so-called Ghulāt Shiism. The fact that W.D. Fard, Elijah Muḥammad, and Malcolm X often referred to them as “Scientists,” “Leaders,” and “Elders” does not demonstrate that they were not the Twelve Imams of the Extremist Shiites.

There was a tendency in the Nation of Islam to use English instead of Arabic terminology: “temples” instead of “mosques” and “scientists” instead of “Imams,” “leaders,” and “scholars.” However, the fact that W.D. Fard and Elijah Muḥammad referred to them as Twelve Imams is telling, particularly during a period of time in which many English speakers were unfamiliar with basic Arabic and Islamic terminology.

What is more, the fact that W.D. Fard described his place of prayer as a temple, as opposed to a mosque, does not suggest that he was ignorant of Islam. On the contrary, it suggests that he came from a Shiite background. After all, many Shia groups do not prefer to call their places of worship “mosques.” They tend to prefer the words *Husayniyyah*, *markaz*, and *jāmi‘*. The Shia also do not refer to their *shuyukh*, scholars and elders, as Imams, and likewise, the Nation of Islam uses the term

⁵⁸ Morrow, *Finding*, 66- 110, 150-151.

“ministers.”

Critics may claim that the Twelve Major Imams of W.D. Fard, Elijah Muḥammad, and the Nation of Islam are black men, that they exist contemporaneously while the Twelve Shiite Imams lived in successive generations, and that there are always twelve in existence at one time, while there is only one Shiite Imam who is the Lord of the Age at any one time.

The claim that the Twelve Imams of W.D. Fard, Elijah Muḥammad, and the Nation of Islam cannot be connected to the Twelve Imams of the Ghulāt Shiites due to the fact that they were black is not sound. As far as W.D. Fard was concerned, there were only two races: the white and the black⁵⁹. Consequently, anyone who was not white, namely of European ancestry, was considered black. Hence, if the Twelve Imams were Arabs, or anything other than European, they were people of color in the mind of W.D. Fard.

Amina Inloes claims that the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, was 50% African, that the eighth Imam, ‘Ali al-Rida was 75% African, that the ninth Imam, Muḥammad al-Taqi was 88% African, that the tenth Imam, ‘Ali al-Naqi, was 94% African, that the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-Askari was 97% African while the twelfth Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdi was 98.4% African.⁶⁰

While several of the Twelve Imams are alleged to have had black African wives, I have challenged this assertion in “Concerning the Color of Adam, the Prophets, and the Imams” which appears in *Restoring the Balance: Using the Qur’an and the Sunnah to Guide a Return to the Prophet’s Islam* and in *Shi’ism in the Maghrib and al-Andalus*.⁶¹ Despite claims to the contrary, the evidence suggests that the women in question came from North Africa, not sub-Saharan Africa.

Amina Inloes does not acknowledge the difference between so-called black Africans and so-called white Africans. She decided to group both North Africa and the Horn of Africa together as “African,” reasoning that “they are both on the same continent.”⁶² The fact of the matter is that sub-Saharan Africans and North African Berbers belong to different genetic and ethnic groups. Their history, language families, and cultures are distinct. Both white Russians and Chinese people have historically lived on the Asian continent. However, they cannot be viewed as members of the same genetic, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural group. They are distinct.

The later Imams were not 98.4% black African. They were primarily Berber or Amazigh, a people of Caucasian ancestry, whose DNA and language family traces back to the Caspian Sea. Tens of thousands of years ago, they set off on a mass migration from Eurasia, and settled in North Africa. Although they were influenced by other cultures, European DNA only left a trace contribution to the

⁵⁹ Morrow, *Finding W.D. Fard*, 279, 368.

⁶⁰ Amina Inloes, “Racial ‘Othering’ in Shi’i Sacred History: Jawn ibn Huwayy the ‘African Slave,’ and the Ethnicities of the Twelve Imams, *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* (Autumn 2014), 224.

⁶¹ John Andrew Morrow, *Restoring the Balance: Using the Qur’an and Sunnah to Guide a Return to the Prophet’s Islam* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 7-25; John Andrew Morrow, *Shi’ism in the Maghrib and al-Andalus*, forthcoming.

⁶² Inloes, “Racial,” 426.

Berbers. As a result of Islamization and Arabization, some of them have mixed with other populations, including Arabs, Jews, Europeans, and black Africans. Some Berbers have black African DNA through their maternal lines as a result of slavery. Genetic studies, however, have shown that the Berbers remain mainly Eurasian in ancestry. They are not black and do not identify as black.

While the attempt by Amina Inloes to blacken some of the Arab-Berber Imams, turning them into Black African Imams,⁶³ has no basis in history, linguistics, culture, and genetics, it does, however, have a basis in the theology of W.D. Fard, who was influenced by so-called Ghulāt Shiism, and appears to have based his beliefs on some isolated traditions, found in Shiite sources, that suggest that some of the Imams were of black African ancestry through their maternal lines. The painting of the Twelve Imams produced by Amina Inloes, in which many of them appear to be black Africans, and in which they sit in a V shape, with Imam ‘Ali at the forefront, and Imam Mahdi at the back left, captures quite well the Council of the Twelve Imams, the God-Scientists, as conceived by Master W.D. Fard.⁶⁴ If the founder of the Nation of Islam conceived the Twelve Imams as black, it was because of his belief, acquired in the United States through contact with immigration law, that only people of European ancestry were legally white.⁶⁵ Consequently, all others were people of color who, concluded W.D. Fard, belonged to the black race.

Finally, while it is true that the Twelve Imams of the Twelver Shiites were historical figures, who did not all live together at the same time, Twelver Shiites believe that they were created prior to the creation of the universe while the so-called Ghulāt Shiites view them as manifestations of God and incarnations of the divine who transcend both time and space. So, no, the Twelve Imams of the Twelver Shiites are not the same as the Twelve Imams of the Nation of Islam. The Twelve Imams of the Nation of Islam, however, do share many of the characteristics of the Twelve Imams of the so-called Ghulāt Shiites. For some scholars, the connection seems convincing. For others, it seems suggestive.

Conclusions

The Twelve Imams played a pivotal role in the theology of W.D. Fard that was taught by Elijah Muḥammad to Malcolm X. As a Minister in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X used to preach about the Twelve Imams to congregations and audiences around the United States. His understanding of the Twelve Imams, however, did not coincide with so-called orthodox, mainstream, and normative Twelver Shiism. Along with an extensive list of other doctrines, Malcolm X’s belief in the Twelve Imams seems to fall into a so-called Ghulāt Shiite framework. Although it was called the Nation of Islam, the movement to which Malcolm X belonged was only nominally Islamic in the eyes of so-called mainstream Muslims. It shares little in common with so-called orthodox Islam, be it Sunni or Shiite. It does, however, fit well into the mold of Ghulāt Shiism in its multifarious manifestations and bifurcations.

If Moḥammad Taki Mehdi spoke to Malcolm X about the Twelve Imams, Ashura, and the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali, he was not teaching the African American leader anything new. He was simply

⁶³ Inloes, “Racial,” 428.

⁶⁴ Inloes, “Racial,” 428, figure 5.

⁶⁵ Morrow, *Finding W.D. Fard*, 279, 368.

presenting Malcolm X with the Twelver Shiite position as opposed to the one espoused by the Nation of Islam which seems to have been inspired by so-called Ghulāt Shiism. Due, in part, to Mehdi’s influence, Malcolm X rejected the notion there was no god but Allah, namely W.D. Fard, and that Muḥammad, namely Elijah Muḥammad, was his final prophet and messenger, and accepted that there was no god but Allah and that the historical Muḥammad (570-632 CE), was his final prophet and messenger. Malcolm X rejected the notion that W.D. Fard was Allah in Person as well as the belief that the Twelve Major Imams and the Twelve Minor Imams were Gods. This does not mean that Malcolm ceased to believe in the Twelve Imams altogether. Malcolm X was transitioning from one Islamic tradition to another. He was in the process of rejecting anything that did not agree with so-called mainstream Islam, be it Shiite or Sunni, while retaining that which agreed with it.

Malcolm X appears to have taken the teachings of W.D. Fard and Elijah Muḥammad and passed them through the filter of so-called traditional Islam. There is no evidence, however, that Malcolm X rejected the belief in the Twelve Imams as well as the spiritual and political status of the Progeny of the Prophet, who were apparently downgraded from divinities to the servants and slaves of the Divinity. He recognized that they were not Allah but rather the servants of Allah. And while Malcolm X abandoned his belief that W.D. Fard was the Mahdi and the Hidden Imam, he may have replaced it with the more orthodox view, namely, the belief in Muḥammad al-Mahdi, the direct descendent of the Prophet Muḥammad from the progeny of Fāṭimah who would appear at the end of times to rid the world of oppression and injustice.

When Mehdi, an orthodox Twelver Shiite, spoke with Malcolm X, the message of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Twelve Imams must have resonated with him. While much has been written about the pilgrimage that Malcolm X performed to Mecca in 1964, nothing, to my knowledge, has been written about the pilgrimage that he performed to the Mosque of Imam al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali in Cairo, Egypt, where the head of the third Imam is said to be buried. Within a few months, Malcolm X would return to America as a changed man.

Despite the dangers he faced, and the threats and attempts on his life, he continued to cry out for justice and criticize the teachings of Elijah Muḥammad which Malcolm X now viewed as fraudulent. Rather than increase his personal protection, he loosened his security detail. There, at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City, on February 21, 1965, precisely six months after his pilgrimage to the Mosque of Imam al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali, namely, on Shawwal 9, 1384 AH, the day after the Holy Graveyards of Madinah were destroyed by the Saudi government in 1926, Malcolm X stood up on stage and died in a hail of gun-fire. For some Shiite Muslims, particularly African Americans, Malcolm X followed in the path of Imam al-Ḥusayn.