

THE BLACK MUSLIMS: A CONTEMPORARY
REVITALIZED MOVEMENT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Social Movements and Social Change

Fluid social conditions are conducive to collective behavior.

Violence sometimes occurs, when rising aspirations are not met by reforming. When events or forces disturb, limit, oppose, sever, destroy or disrupt on-going processes of social disorganization, conflicts or changes are likely to occur.¹ New perspectives and aspirations often generate collective action and institute new ways of life. Tensions and disruptions caused by both external and internal stresses and strains acting on an organization may be resolved or suppressed, or tensions and disruptions may grow into conflicts which eventually call for extensive changes. All organizations are subjected to diverse kinds of strains. For this reason, social theorists often speak of social conflict and social change as immanent and universal within social organization.²

Given ever-present stresses and strains acting upon social organizations, tension and disruptions are produced.

It appears appropriate to construct a theoretical explanation of the process through which these stresses and strains lead to open conflict and to relatively permanent organizational change.

¹Wilbert E. Moore, A Reconsideration of Theories of Social Change, American Sociological Review, Vol. 25, Dec. 1960, pp. 810-818.

²Pitrim A. Sorokin, Sociological and Cultural Dynamics (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1957), Chapter 38.

From a broader point of view, we can identify two schools of theoretical thought in contemporary sociology concerning social conflict and change. These are the "adjustive" and the "power" perspectives on conflict and change.³ The adjustive maneuvers to initiate compensatory action concerning the disruptions which threaten the 'key features' in a social organization. The power perspective takes a radically different course. It suggests that when compensatory action fails, partially autonomous subunits of an organization should exercise power and act in their own behalf and interest, independent of the larger organization.

At times, therefore, the component subunits will tend to act as self-oriented elements. They will temporarily seek to deal with their own internal problems in order to achieve individual goals, rather than contribute to the functioning of the encompassing organization. Thus, independent goalseeking actions of subunits that the power perspective takes as given phenomena frequently are these units' attempts to protect their own 'key features' through adjustive measures. When such unified, lasting, collective action has the following features it is called a social movement, (1) a distinct perspective and ideology, (2) a strong sense of solidarity and idealism, and (3) an orientation toward action.⁴

³James C. Davies, Toward A Theory of Revolution, ASR, Vol. 27, February 1962, pp. 5-19.

⁴Herbert Blumer, Social Movements in A.M. Lee (ed.) New Outlines of the Principles of Society (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1951), pp. 210-211.

Revitalization Movements

Several instances of attempted and sometimes successful innovation of whole cultural systems have been examined by behavioral scientists. These innovations have been commonly labeled and characterized as "Nativistic, Reform, Messianic, Charismatic, Mass, and Social-type movements." In addition, "Cargo cults, Utopian community, Sect formulation, and Revolution," also are innovational instances. All these phenomena of major cultural innovation progress through a uniform process called "revitalization."⁵ The definition by Wallace of a revitalization movement as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture," implies an organismic analogy. Included, are the corollary principles of stress and homeostasis, and society, seen as an organic system is constantly exposed to stress induced in its component subsystems. Thus, society, maintains its integrity by means of coordinated actions or stress-reducing mechanisms sufficient to handle both external and internal stress.

For a person involved in the process of revitalization, Wallace finds it necessary for each member to be equipped with a "mazeway," i.e., a mental image of self, society, nature, and culture through which values operate in maintaining social order to minimize stress. Wallace notes: "whenever an individual who is under chronic stress receives repeated information which indicates that his "mazeway" does not lead to action which should reduce the

⁵Anthony C. Wallace, Revitalization Movements, American Anthropologist, Vol. 58, 1956, p. 264.

level of stress, he must choose between maintaining his present mazeway and tolerating the stress, or changing the mazeway in an attempt to reduce the stress."⁶ Sometimes it may become necessary to make changes in the "real" system in order to bring "mazeway" and "reality" into congruence. The effort to work a change in the mazeway and real system together so as to permit more effective stress reduction, is the effort of revitalization; and the collaboration of the number of persons in such an effort, is called a revitalization movement.⁷

Consequences

Revitalization movements are not an unusual phenomena. In fact, it can be argued that all organized religions are relics of old revitalization movements surviving in routinized form in stabilized cultures, and that religious phenomena per se originated in the revitalization process, i.e., in visions of a new way of life by individuals under extreme stress.⁸

The most prominent historical cases documented by Wallace's findings include the origins of Christianity and Islam in Asia, and the Ghost Dance and Peyote cult of the American Indian tribes in America.

All revitalization movements in cases where the full course is run, move through five ideal-typical stages:⁹

⁶Ibid., p. 267.

⁷James H. Laue, A Contemporary Revitalization Movement in American Race Relations, Social Forces, No. 42, 1964, p. 316.

⁸Wallace, op. cit., p. 268.

⁹Ibid., pp. 268-275.

1. Steady State - chronic stress within the system varies within tolerable limits because culturally recognized techniques for the satisfying needs operate efficiently.
2. Period of Increased Individual Stress - Individual members of a population experience increasingly severe stress as a result of the decreasing efficiency of certain stress reduction techniques over a period of time.
3. Period of Cultural Distortion - Individual maladjustments combine to produce internal cultural distortion because the "elements" are not harmoniously related but are mutually incongruent and interfering. Stress reproduces itself and anxiety rises as the incongruities of the "mazeway" are conceived, i.e., disillusionment with, apathy toward problems of adaptation, and a meaningless life arise.
4. The Period of Revitalization - [Disaster to total cultures or subsystems of a society may be forestalled through the revitalization process.] This theory specifies six major tasks which a revitalization movement must perform at this stage: mazeway reformulation, communication, organization, adaptation, culture transformation, and routinization.
5. New Steady State - Once cultural transformation has taken place, a new organization or Gestalt is in operation for members of the revitalized group and the host and/or neighboring cultures.

Sociological Significance

A movement is usually made up of a variety of forms and groupings. Such diversity of organizations, ideologies, and strategies, is exemplified specifically by the civil rights movements where each organization tends to adopt a distinctive mission and role, and a distinctive appeal to its constituency. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) concentrates on legal rights; the National Urban League, for enlarging job opportunities and negotiating with business associations; the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) - all have organized direct-action such as freedom rides,

sit-ins, voting rights, and protest marches. The Black Muslims, to be considered later, however, have fostered self-improvement, Negro isolation, and rejection of white society.

Negro actions opposing slavery in the past to present day massive attacks on racial discrimination manifest a long history of racial protest organizations and movements in the United States. Protest movements have become a symptom of pervasive social conflict distorting the normal social relations between discrete groups of people. Recently, direct-action protest has become an important means of communicating the Negro's extreme dissatisfaction with his condition of existence in America.¹⁰

A large population of Negroes have grown increasingly restive under practices of racial discrimination and prejudice. Their frustrations increase as they see some people assume political and social roles which they as citizens of an advanced Christian culture have yet to attain. There is developing, therefore, a radical element within the Negro subgroup which covets the leadership of these leaderless masses who have yet to commit themselves to traditional forms of Negro protest. Many black man and women have not participated in sit-ins, have not marched, and not belonged to protest organizations. They have simply lost faith in the ability of Negro leadership to rescue them from their misery. They do not believe that agencies directed by the white man at any level are truly concerned with bringing them to a place of equality in this society.¹¹

¹⁰Benjamin Muse, The American Negro Revolution: From Nonviolence to Black Power (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 24-25.

¹¹Eric C. Lincoln, My Face is Black (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

One may well expect from symptoms of their present conditions to see concerted efforts for change by blacks to make congruent their "mazeway" and "real" system. Indeed, one could visualize that a kind of chauvinistic anxiety move to a new position would permit more effective stress reduction.

Black nationalism historically through protest organizations and movements indicated the Negro's struggle for freedom, and also, that his so-called "mazeway" did not lead to action which reduced the level of stress for him. According to the revitalization theory, two alternatives are open to the individual under stressful circumstances: he can either maintain his present mazeway and tolerate the stress, or make a change in the mazeway in order to reduce the stress.

The Black Muslim Movement and Revitalization Theory

The Black Muslim movement is one of the several alternative avenues of expression for many angry, sensitive, and disillusioned Black Americans today. Although substantially Americanized at the value level, the Black American is frustrated at the personality level because he lacks institutionalized channels of cultural and economic achievement. In the past, the dominant culture provided a closed system for blacks where self-hate and neuroticism were used as adjustive techniques. Today, more aggressive, safely available channels of protest include: enhanced endeavor, discrimination against out-groups, and militancy.¹² The mechanisms

¹²Gordon W. Allport, The Nature of Prejudice, (Garden City; New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1958), Chapter 19.

available in the Black Muslim movement include these plus the substitution of identity as a "Muslim" and not as a "Negro."

The Black Muslim movement also exhibits several of the phases of the revitalization movements which Wallace has suggested:

1. The Nativistic phase of the Muslim movement eliminates the white slave master and his so-called 'evil' system. It replaces it by an all-black nation within a nation in which contact with the white's alien customs and values is undesirable.
2. After the Revivalistic fashion, the Black Muslims strive to institute patterns of ancient Islamic culture.
3. The Millenarian emphasis of the movement, too is strong because the messenger, Elijah Muhammad and his disciples state time and again, that Allah (God) will engineer a demise of the white man if the white man does not repent in time.
4. The Messianic character of the movement is evidenced by the belief of the Black Muslims that Elijah Muhammad is a messianic figure - in flesh.

Wallace suggests five ideal-typical stages of development through which revitalization movements usually move. For viewing the sociological significance, and to establish the authenticity of Black Muslims as a revitalized movement, we may now view the points of congruence and/or variation between Wallace's so-called "processual structure,"¹³ and the historical development of the Black Muslim movement in question.

Some of the dynamic patterns which have bred and nurtured the Black Muslim movement may be summarized as follows:

1. The dissatisfaction of Negroes with their disproportionate share of the benefits from the expanding American economy.
2. The failure of the existing political, occupational, and religious systems to provide meaningful rationalization for the inability of blacks to attain democratic goals.

¹³Wallace, op. cit., pp. 268-269.

3. The emergence of African independent nations - undoubtedly the most specific model for black militancy today. Black Muslim leaders press for identification with the African spirit of revolt. African independence parallels seeking independence from the white man in America.

The Black Muslim movement is also symptomatic of the anxiety and unrest which characterizes the contemporary black world situation today. They realize however, that the bulk of Black Americans, especially the upper and middle class, are throughly middle class in their values and are inhibited from pursuing a 'Back-to-Africa' type of Garveyism.¹⁴

Wallace's terminology of 'steady state' does not seem appropriate in the present case. Societies are hardly ever in a state which can be properly described as steady. The history of the black-white conflict in America suggests that all Negroes did not maintain a stable relationship to whites in the sense that Wallace's theory implies. Thus, social changes in the movement are better identified as 'stage one' and 'stage two' with the intervening processes seen as mediating developments leading to a new stage of systemic equilibrium. Stage one was characterized by nationalistic movements through the 1920's, and stage two is arbitrarily designated at commencing in the mid-1950's. The Black Muslim movement is an intermediary movement between these two stages.

II. Period of Increased Individual Stress

The period of "breakdown of the stress reducing mechanisms," for the Negro American has been occurring since the day the first slave arrived. If this was not so, protests of varying intensity throughout the last three

¹⁴Laue, op. cit., p. 320.

hundred years would not have taken place.¹⁵ Stress reducing devices have not been provided by the American society either. In order to avoid further status, social, and economic deprivation, the Black Muslims have sought voluntary separatism from whites and middle class blacks as the adjustive technique for changing their mazeway and reducing the stress. By working in prisons and on the streets of Harlem and other large cities, Black Muslims have apparently succeeded in convincing converts of their deprivation, and have presented converts new, ready-made, life-consuming identity wrapped in the black supremacy concept.¹⁶

III. Period of Cultural Distortion

Prolonged stress produced by failure of need satisfaction of the Negro made many to turn to regressive actions of crime, alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, and family disorganization. Such deviance produced distortion of the Negro subculture. The Black Muslims have capitalized on this cultural distortion by winning many of their converts from this lowest plane of society.

IV. Period of Revitalization

The first task in revitalization is the mazeway reformulation. Reformulation usually depends on restructuring of elements and subsystems already current in a system. The Black Muslim claim to preach a doctrine entirely alien to American culture, but actually, their position entails

¹⁵Louis Lomax, The Negro Revolt (New York: Harpers', 1962).

¹⁶Laue, op. cit., p. 321.

accepting and reshaping middle class ideals and values.¹⁷ They also believe they are the 'elect' of Allah (God). Pursuit of wealth is only good in so far as it enhances the good of the movement and elevates it also. Therefore, converts to Islam, the Black Muslims claim, will naturally come under supernatural care and protection received through divine guidance of their leader, Elijah Muhammad.

More important than the reformulation of the mazeway, is the adaptation and application of it to every day life. The communication of the insights of the messenger to his disciples and converts is such adapting and applying. Black Muslims rationalize advantages of this process by believing that the convert will come under care and protection of certain supernatural being, and that both he and his society will benefit materially from identification with some definable new cultural system - the Black Muslim interpretation of Islam.

The organizational phase of the revitalization stage depends on the legitimate transfer of charismatic qualities to other individuals in the organization. Although Elijah Muhammad is regarded as the unquestionable authority - sanctioned by the supernatural - the leadership structure has sufficiently developed to ensure its maintenance after his death. The disciplinary strength of the Fruit of Islam, (FOI) the unifying force for all Black Muslims, makes other Negro rights organizations and other lower-class religious groups envious.¹⁸

¹⁷E. U. Esseim-Udom, Black Nationalism: A Search for An Identity (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), Chapter 12.

¹⁸Laue, op. cit., pp. 321-322.

The adaptation phase of the revitalization process occupies an important area of the theory. Wallace suggests three aspects of this process: doctrinal modification, political and diplomatic maneuvers, and force. Some modifications are manifest in the Black Muslim drive in that, (1) softening black supremacy is to attract others besides lower class blacks, (2) the target of black resentment is colonialism and not always the white man, (3) relationships with other Negro rights groups have improved because Black Muslim leaders no longer isolate themselves from NAACP chapters and Christian congregations, (4) they no longer so strongly condemn Christianity. Muhammad often seeks cooperation of Christians in areas of mutual interest.¹⁹ Perhaps the hostility of the Muslims stems more from what Christianity has not done for the Negro in the past rather than what it has done. (5) with regard to force as an adaptive technique, Wallace suggests that as organized hostility develops, emphasis shifts from the cultivating ideal to combating the unbeliever. Since the early 1960's, the environment has been perceived as less hostile hence the emphasis has swung to internal concerns of solidarity and uplift.²⁰ The Black Muslim movement today appears to be in the 'adaptive' stage of revitalization. How long it will remain there will perhaps depend on the acceptance of the movement as a legitimate means of social adjustment by a considerable proportion of the population. Also, if the Muslims continue to adapt their way to solve new stressful problems of blacks who are most disillusioned.

¹⁹Eric C. Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 200.

²⁰Ibid., p. 159.

For Wallace, routinization occurs after the desired transformation has taken place. During Elijah Muhammad's lifetime such transformation has taken place. Perhaps the real challenge will come after his death as to who will be his legitimate successor.

V. New Steady State

Wallace's theory of five ideal-typical stages requires that the revitalization movement progresses through each stage. This analysis and terminology is derived from documentary data of several hundred "dead" movements among western and nonwestern peoples on five continents gathered in a survey of anthropological literature.²¹ This approach limits this analysis. One must characterize the Black Muslim movement as an "in-process" movement, and interpret its sociological significance in that context.

Problem Statement

The main purpose of this report is to view the Black Muslim movement as an in-process revitalization movement in America, whose members are making "a deliberate, organized, and conscious effort to construct a more satisfying culture," for themselves, and to ascertain the impact of such collective endeavor on a segment of the black community that professes to be active members of this movement.

²¹Wallace, op. cit., p. 264.

CHAPTER II

RISE OF SOCIAL TENSION FOR BLACK AMERICANS

American Negroes have lived in the United States for three hundred and fifty years under conditions ranging between slavery and freedom, with instances of conflict, revolt and accommodation which present fascinating and challenging social situations. The forced transplanted of African Negroes as slaves to America,²² their transition from slavery to freedom,²³ and later a continuous mass migration from the plantation to the metropolis,²⁴ bear witness to the social metamorphosis of this group of people. Many died as a result of their struggle for a better life.

"... that the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary - a lesser people might have died out, as indeed others have. That the Negro community has not only survived but has entered national affairs as a moderate, humane, and constructive national force, is the highest testament to the healing powers of the "democratic ideal," and the creative vitality of the Negro people."²⁵

In their study of major ethnic groups, Glazer and Moynihan estimated the Negro as being "... only an American, and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and to protect."²⁶

²²Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), p. 123.

²³E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (New York: Mcmillan, 1949), rev. ed., 1966. Introduction and Chapter 1.

²⁴Myrdal, op. cit., Part III, Chapter 8.

²⁵Moynihan, op. cit., p. 75.

²⁶N. Glazer and P. D. Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press and the Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 51.

The transportation of slaves from Africa completely disrupted the life of the Africans and contributed mightily to their "Americanization." The discontinuity between Africa and America had a particular impact on Negro family life as well.

Among the earliest settlers in this country, American Negro history can be subdivided into three distinct periods. The period of slavery (1619-1863); the period of biracial accommodation (1863-1941); and the period of integration or of voluntary separatism (1941 to present).²⁷ Three facts also stand out. The first that the Negro came to this country from Africa and not from Europe. The second that they came in chains and consequently were uprooted from their culture and family moorings. The third that they have been subjected to systematic exclusion from social and economic participation and influence in the major institutions of the society.²⁸

Loss of Native Culture

The Africans who were taken captive and brought to North America represented several cultures and language backgrounds. Some carried knowledge of the complex cultures representing highly advanced civilizations.²⁹ They were thrown into a totally rootless situation, were not allowed to

²⁷S. K. Weinberg, Race Relations: Conflict and Change (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1970), Chapter 5.

²⁸Andrew Billingsley, Black Families in White America (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 37-49.

²⁹L. Bennett, Jr., Just Before the Mayflower (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966). Also see M. Herskovitz, The Myth of the Negro Past (New York: Harper and Row, 1941).

retain their names, their family structure, and derivatively their identities were destroyed. Several scholars agree that systematic attempts were made to strip the Africans of their culture. Frazier summarizes the impact of slavery on the slaves as follows:

"The African family system was destroyed, and the slave was separated from his kinsmen and friends. Moreover, in the United States there was little chance that he could reknit the ties of friendship and old associations. If by chance he encountered fellow slaves with whom he could communicate in his native tongue, he was separated from them. From the very beginning he was forced to learn English in order to obey the commands of his white master. Whatever memories he might have retained of his native land and native customs became meaningless in the New World."³⁰

That the old world culture failed to survive for Black Americans should not be surprising.

Such cultural destruction and denying initiative-taking to Negroes molded the personality and behavior of Negroes disadvantageously. In bondage, they acquired a completely dependent position. A bearable life for the slave depended not on initiative or drive, but on blind obedience and being uncomplainingly subservient to the master, who, in turn, pursued the very goals which he denied his Negro slave. Slaves were "property" to be sold, traded, or given as gifts by slave owners. To the slave trader who only had an economic interest, the slave was a mere "utility."³¹

In moving from Africa to the New World, Negroes were confronted with an alien culture of European genesis with different norms, values, and ways of life. Therefore, whatever the nature of the two cultural systems, that

³⁰E. F. Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), p. 1.

³¹E. F. Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States, p. 360.

one from which they came and the one to which they were brought, they were never free to engage in the usual process of acculturation. Not only were they cut off from their previous culture, but they were not permitted to develop or assimilate to the new culture similarly to other immigrant groups.³²

Unlike other immigrants too, most Negroes were denied the use of their own system of social or family organization. Negro Americans were unable to build a community on ethnic unity to sustain individual Negroes. In fact, social and economic competition between each wave of immigrants and migrating Negroes in the 20th century has been continual but with odds stacked heavily against the Negro. Insignificant social and family ties, lack of political strength, and discriminatory practices and repression from practically from all whites, prevented Negroes from developing any consistent and significant achievement or assimilation since the Civil War.

While Negroes have been here longer than most immigrant groups, they did not start arriving in the northern, urban cities in large numbers until this century. The Negro is the 'latest immigrant.' But despite the growing concentration of Negroes in northern cities, this 'latest immigrant' has not had the same political opportunities to achieve economic ends as quickly as other European immigrants who went to work in an expanding blue-collar economy. Actually, the Negro has come to the city in a time of automation - unskilled jobs were disappearing - and when educational requirements for skilled labor were high.³³

³²Billingsley, op. cit., p. 49.

³³M. Harrington, The Other America (New York: Mcmillian, 1962), p. 37.

It could be assumed that the Negro would have assimilated and integrated Anglo-American culture, perhaps better than his counter-part the European immigrant who arrived on the scene much later. However, such an assumption is incorrect because racial segregation and discrimination of Negroes prevented their being assimilated. Gunnar Myrdal and his associates sum these odds for us appropriately:

" ... while it is true that considerable efforts are directed toward 'Americanization' of all groups of alien origin, in the case of the colored peoples, the American policy is in reverse. They are excluded from assimilation."³⁴

Unlike Orientals, the Negro did not have an accepted culture or an organized nation to fall back upon outside of America. With the memory of slavery -- a grim, dehumanizing circumstance -- they were exploited as a subordinate caste. In fact, the 'anti-amalgamation doctrine' is still rationalized in several states by the white majority group to prevent miscegenation, and hence to preserve the purity of the white race.³⁵

The very circumstances which led to their departure from their homeland, the Middle Passage between Africa and the New World, and the institution of slavery which developed on their arrival in what is now known as the United States are unique only to Black Americans out of all United States minority groups. The institution of slavery, with all its peculiarities, left a legacy which continues to play a dominant role in the life of all Americans. After nearly three and a half centuries, white Americans continue to react to Negroes with a mass irrationality which precludes the complete entrance of blacks into the larger society. Yet it

³⁴Myrdal, op. cit., pp. 624-626.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 586-592.