

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975)



In the early 1960's, the popular magazine, *Reader's Digest* called him "The Most Powerful Black Man in America." In 1962, American author and social critique, James Baldwin wrote in his #1 Best Seller, *Fire Next Time*, "Elijah Muhammad has been able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects and playgrounds have failed to do:

To heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who came out of prison and to keep them out; to make men chaste and women virtuous and to invest both the male and the female with a pride and serenity that hang about them like an unfailing light. He has done all these things, which our Christian church has spectacularly failed to do." (p. 72).

Haley says Muhammad #1, Malcolm #2

In 1976, Alex Haley, author of *Roots* and collaborator on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* said, "If I had to pick the single person who has been the most important figure for blacks in the black thrust from post-World War II, I would unequivocally pick Elijah Muhammad. Because it was he who....was like a lightning bolt in opening up the consciousness of black people...from this just blank psychic wall of just total fear of the structure in which we lived. And I am saying these things clinically. Underneath him I would put Malcolm X and Dr. King on equal basis. They appealed to broadly different groups. Dr. King...the church structure....Malcolm....the grass roots." (*Black Scholar*, Vol. 8, No. 1, September, 1976 p. 37-38).

100 Greatest African Americans

In 2003, Molefi Kente Asante, scholar, professor and Chair of African American Studies at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA selected the Honorable Elijah Muhammad as one of the 100 Greatest African Americans. Dr. Asante said his selection criteria represented the general will of African American people and not necessarily popularity or wealth. That the broad struggle for justice and equality matters most to African Americans. His criteria was:

1. Significance in the general movement of African Americans towards full equality.
2. Self-sacrifice and undertaking of risk for the collective good.
3. Unusual will and determination in the face of the greatest danger and against the most stubborn odds.
4. A consistent posture towards the social, cultural and economic uplifting of African American people.
5. Personal achievement that calls attention to the capability and genius of African American people. (p.17).

Poverty, Persecution and Promise

Born Elijah Poole, in a small town a few miles from Sandersville, Georgia in 1897, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was raised in poverty and was one of thirteen children. His father was an uneducated Baptist preacher, his mother a homemaker. The family moved to Cordele, Georgia to seek a better economic existence by working in the cotton mills and on the railroad. In was in Cordele, Georgia that he met Clara Evans. They married, had children and migrated to Detroit, Michigan in 1923. It was there in 1931 that they encountered W. D. Fard Muhammad and the *Lost Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America*. They accepted Islam and became the leaders and shapers of that organization later called the Nation of Islam until 1972 and 1975 respectively.

During its development in the 1930's and 1940's the organization and members were consistently persecuted by Christian preachers, the business establishment and law enforcement. Elijah Muhammad and his new Muslim community were demeaned in the newspapers, sanctioned, jailed and their Temples of Islam and schools, (University of Islam) were eventually shut down.

From 1931 to 1942 virtually all of the men at the Temples of Islam throughout the cities of Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. were incarcerated. The charges of sedition and failing to register for the draft during the early days of World War II were used to imprison them. Historian and biographer, Claude Andrew Clegg III, wrote in *An Original Man, The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, "...the FBI used the arrest as a pretext for conducting a multistate assault on the Temple People."(pp. 85 – 90). Elijah Muhammad and his son were imprisoned from 1942 to 1946 along with approximately three hundred Muslim men in four states.

Since his release in 1946, he lived with the scourge of being called a thug and criminal. Such words were famously used in 1959 by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in describing him and the Muslim movement. That opinion became polemical and was shared by those who sought to deter the growth of Islam in America and by Negro leaders who supported integration as a solution to the race problem. Others vehemently disagreed. In particular, a response to Thurgood Marshall by George Schuyler, a Black conservative wrote in the *Pittsburg Courier*, “Mr. Muhammad may be a rogue..... but when anyone can get tens of thousands of Negroes to practice economic solidarity, respect their women, alter their atrocious diet, give up liquor, stop crime and juvenile delinquency and adultery, he is doing more for Negroes’ welfare than any current leader I know.” (See *Elijah Muhammad Dead: Black Muslim Leader 77*, Special to *The New York Times*, February 26, 1975. <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1007.html>).

Within a span of 30 years, the leadership of Elijah Muhammad established the largest independently owned and operated school system, the University of Islam; the largest independent newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*; a fish import business worth over \$22 million dollars and a collection of small grocery stores, bakeries, sewing factories, clothing shops and farm land which grew food for export. No one in the history of the African American experience has acquired such accomplishments. The seminal study by Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* best delineates the social significance of the Nation of Islam, especially the school system.

He Called the White man the Devil and the World Changed

During the early years of his mission, The Honorable Elijah Muhammad - citing the 400 year tragedy of slavery, lynchings and Jim Crow - called white people devils. He declared that attempts by Black people to co-exist with them were fruitless and they should separate. The media broadcast of “The Hate that Hate Produced” in 1959, stressed hate and throughout his leadership there was a concerted effort to paint Elijah Muhammad as a black racist and equate him with the Ku Klux Klan. The media continues to promote that distortion.

Did Elijah Muhammad teach hate? He answered the question himself. “They say I am a preacher of racial hatred. The fact is white people don’t like the truth, especially if it speaks against them. It is a terrible thing for such people to charge me with teaching race hatred when their feet are on my people’s neck and they tell us to our face that they hate black people. Remember now, they even teach you that you must not hate them for hating you.”

In an interview on C-SPAN, historian, professor and biographer of Elijah Muhammad, Dr. Claude Andrew Clegg III noted, “The extensive FBI files on the Honorable Elijah Muhammad tends to be accurate with matters of fact.” For example where he was on a particular day, what he did, etc.” “However, matters of opinion is where the FBI has its problems.” “That is they saw communism and subversion, everywhere. They thought the Nation of Islam was a radical group that was going to bring in the Armageddon and overthrow the U.S. government. So as far as analyzing the facts that they had gathered the

FBI had a problem because they were looking through the lens of a very anti-communist, anti-subversive pair of glasses.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUEQSTT0zRQ>

Elijah Dignified Blackness

When asked what is it about Islam that makes it attractive to African Americans? Professor Clegg responds, “I think Elijah’s biggest legacy, biggest significance is that he makes Blackness respectable among African Americans. He kind of sells black people to themselves. He rejuvenates people’s sense of pride, self-esteem and their pride in their racial and cultural heritage. Also the economic initiate of the Nation of Islam – largely lower class people – pulling their resources together to buy a major newspaper printing press, farm land, grocery stores, a jet, a bank, etc.; creating an economic model of self-help by people who had never owned or contributed to such.”

He continued, “Also there is a moral significance although there were contradictions in his life and behavior.

The moral message of the Nation of Islam: don’t beat your wife, don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t eat pork, don’t do drugs, clean up your neighborhoods, hold a steady job, and don’t get on welfare. I think that moral message created boundaries for those who did not have and needed structure. Finally, I think the significance of the Nation of Islam is that it introduced African Americans to an alternative religious vision outside of Christianity. If Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam had never existed I don’t think Islam would be the kind of force it is in some American cities and urban areas it is today. So, making people aware of the Eastern faith of Islam, although Elijah Muhammad taught a very peculiar style of Islam, I think is very significant.”

For additional biographical information see: [Project Guttenberg](#)

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4/13/2016
