

## Introduction

### *“The Most Dynamic Pamphlets in History”*

Many experienced their first glimpse of the imam via a poster that appeared on subway station walls around the turn of the 1980s. He stands in a white robe and turban, his hands open in invitation. His forehead bears the bruise associated with frequent *sujdah* (prostration); his upper left cheek bears three parallel scars, his tribal marks. His body is framed by two territories—a red outline of the United States, captioned “WEST,” and a green outline of Africa, marked “EAST”—and a variant of the Prophet Muhammad’s seal, reading *la ilaha illa Allah* (there is no god but Allah). Above his head, in elegant Arabic calligraphy, we find *bismillahir rahmanir rahim* (in the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful); at his feet, the caption *al-Mukhlas*, rendered in Arabic with the English translation “The Purifier.”

“NOW!!!” the poster commands, “RECEIVE THE ANSWERS TO LIFE-LONG QUESTIONS!!!” Promising “the most dynamic pamphlets in history,” the poster offers a list of 116 publications. Scanning the titles, a reader might recognize some as anchored in Islam: *Ninety-Nine Plus One Names of Allah*; *Why Allah Should Not Be Called God*; *Why the Veil?*; *Why the Beard?*; *Fast of Ramadaan*; *Series of Hadith*; *Bilal*; *Qur’ an Arabic Lesson One*. Other titles seem to express a Christian orientation (*Christ Is the Answer*; *Understanding the Book of Revelation*; *Opening of the Seventh Seal*; *Leviathan: 666*) or a commitment to the recovery of African heritage (*Yoruba*; *Great African Kings*; *Ancient Egypt and the Pharaohs*; *Science of the Pyramids*; *Tribal Encyclopedia*). Still others suggest an interest in various “metaphysical” traditions commonly grouped together



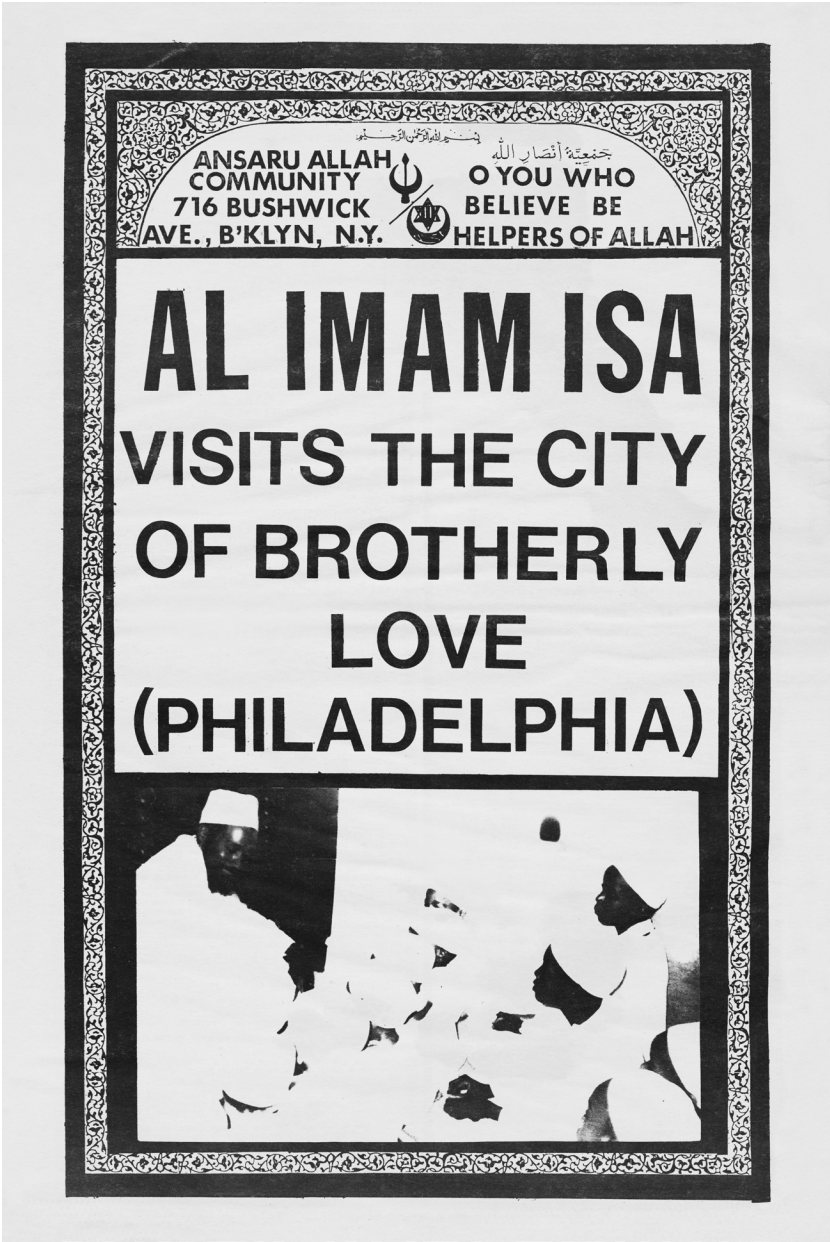


FIGURE 2 *Al Imam Isa Visits the City of Brotherly Love (Philadelphia), ca. 1980.*

In the early 1990s, the community relocated from Brooklyn to a commune in the Catskills, and in 1993 it migrated to a 476-acre property in rural Georgia. The latter move accompanied an apparent self-reinvention using a bricolage of materials that included contemporary UFO-centered religions, Freemasonry, New Age modes of mysticism and healing, and traditions of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Popularly known as Nuwaubians, the community members now regarded their leader as a visitor from the planet Rizq, in the nineteenth galaxy, Illyuwn. For outside observers, the community's definitive features would become its eclectic references and seemingly incoherent self-identification, as it followed its leader in and out of various affiliations, faith convictions, codes of dress, and ritual practices in accordance with his whims.

In 2002, the man from the poster having been taken into police custody, a force of three hundred FBI, ATF, and local law enforcement personnel stormed the community's land with armored trucks and helicopters, seizing weapons and cash and taking control of the property. Media coverage of the event marveled at the commune's unique architecture (including a black pyramid with gold trim seemingly styled after the Ka'ba in Mecca), and at the community's interest in pharaonic Egypt and belief that its leader was an extraterrestrial. As of this writing, the man from the poster, a convicted sexual predator in his seventies, is serving a sentence of more than one hundred years at the ADMAX facility in Florence, Colorado.

This book examines the public discourse of a community that has defied easy categorization, in part because both the community and its leader appear to have undergone numerous intellectual and aesthetic makeovers since its origins at the end of the 1960s. Self-identified through the 1970s and '80s as the Ansaru Allah Community (AAC) and/or the Nubian Islamic Hebrews (NIH), the community provoked questions of religious categorization and the modes through which its boundaries are constructed, in both popular and academic contexts (fig. 3). What exactly did it mean to be an "Islamic Hebrew"? Were members of the community Muslim or Jewish? Did they blend different religious traditions in a new mash-up all their own? When they changed their community's name and dress codes, did they also switch religions? How did the community make sense of these changes? And how were categories of "Islam" and "Judaism" affected by the community's interest in the themes of ancient Egypt and UFO religion?



**INCARNATED IN HUMAN FORM**

**FROM BEYOND AND BACK  
THE ANSWERS TO ALL OF YOUR  
QUESTIONS:**  
AS SAYYID AL IMAAM ISA AL HAADI AL MAHDI (HAFIZAHU ALLAH)  
**WITH ASTOUNDING INFORMATION AND LONG AWAITED  
ANSWERS TO YOUR BAFFLING QUESTIONS**  
CLASSES ARE HELD EVERY SUNDAY AT 1:00 P.M.  
FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:  
THE NUBIAN ISLAAMIC HEBREWS (ANSAARU ALLAH COMMUNITY)  
719 BUSHWICK AVENUE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11221, CALL: (718) 443-4414

FIGURE 3 Advertisement for public classes, 1987.

Scholarship on the AAC/NIH begins with a sectarian polemic. The main secondary source on the community in the 1980s, Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips's *The Ansar Cult in America* (1988), was published by Riyadh-based Tawheed Publications with the stated intention of exposing Al Hajj Imam Isa Al Haadi Al Mahdi—the man from the poster—as a heretical charlatan who had transgressed the boundaries of Islam. The tract includes remarks on an earlier draft from Saudi Arabia's Presidency of Islamic Research, Ifta and Propagation, which offers suggestions on how to better clarify the AAC/NIH's "falsehood, shamefulness, and remoteness from the correct path"; Philips comments that the finished volume represents his fulfillment of that mandate.<sup>2</sup> The book's introduction, by Ahmad Muhammad Ahmad Jalli, associate professor of Islamic theology at King Saud University, places the AAC/NIH within what Jalli terms the "Baatinite (esoteric) movement," a phenomenon that he defines as including all of Shi'ism, along with the Druze, Baha'ism, the Ahmadiyya, and other traditions. This apparently monolithic "Baatinite movement," Jalli says, has "attempted to destroy the Islamic faith and lead a revolt against the teachings of Islamic law by employing free interpretations of the religious texts, claiming that all texts have an outer obvious meaning known only to the masses and an inner hidden meaning known only to a select few initiates." Such groups, he warns, "wear the cloak of Islaam while striving to destroy it from within."<sup>3</sup> Relying on post-1975 media and interviews with estranged former members, Philips divides AAC/NIH history into four stages of development: "Foundation," "Mahdism," "The Christ" (in which Al Mahdi identifies himself as the returning Jesus), and finally "God Incarnate" (in which Al Mahdi exploits Sufism's "mystical short-cuts" and the "aberrant philosophy" of medieval Andalusian master Ibn al-ʿArabi for his own gain).<sup>4</sup>

Philips's division of AAC/NIH history into clear "stages," each marked by clear doctrinal shifts, name changes, and redesigned symbols and uniforms, became the standard narrative by which the community would be understood, perhaps informing even its own narratives. Scholarly treatments have defined the community as marked by constant change, serial mass conversions, and abrupt pivots between identities. These accounts, however, disagree with one another as to the community's precise trajectory. Among claims found in academic literature, we read that the AAC/NIH started as a Jewish group and later became Muslim;<sup>5</sup> started as a Muslim group and later became Jewish;<sup>6</sup> "began to sound more specifically Islamic" after 1973, its leader claiming descent

from the Prophet in 1988;<sup>7</sup> started as a spinoff from the Nation of Islam but later abandoned racist doctrines to become Qur'an-centered "fundamentalists";<sup>8</sup> developed unique doctrines to compete with "orthodox" Muslims and then became more Bible-centered;<sup>9</sup> sought greater conformity with "orthodox" Muslims by the start of the 1990s;<sup>10</sup> grew open to reform in the 1980s with input from the Sudanese Mahdiyya but ignored Mahdiyya objections to its Bible usage;<sup>11</sup> broke ties with the Sudanese Mahdiyya in 1980;<sup>12</sup> and ultimately reoriented itself around Christ's imminent return.<sup>13</sup> Rather than attempt to sort this out with a comprehensive engagement of the community's immense literary output over time, scholarship has taken it for granted that the community has no interest in making sense to itself or outsiders. As NRM (New Religious Movement) studies supplanted Islamic studies as the primary academic field giving attention to the AAC/NIH, the community began to be treated as a movement of esotericist deconstruction, led by a gnostic trickster for whom instability, self-contradiction, and doctrinal incoherence serve as teaching exercises.<sup>14</sup>

This book takes a different approach. Examining decades' worth of AAC/NIH books, pamphlets, newsletters, and lecture tapes, it tells a story not only of transformations but also of continuities. I resist assumptions that the movement pinballed at random between categories of "Islam," "Judaism," "New Age," "UFO religion," and "Egyptian religion." Instead of emphasizing serial reinvention, the following discussion examines rhetorical threads through which the community maintains its sense of coherence.

Specifically, this book engages the Ansaru Allah Community/Nubian Islamic Hebrews with an interest in the movement's vision of "metaphysical Africa." I owe the term to Catherine Albanese's "metaphysical Asia," which she employs in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* to describe the ways in which Americans reinvented Asia "according to their Americanized metaphysical categories."<sup>15</sup> Metaphysical Asia signifies the reconstruction of essentialized "Eastern spirituality" under an American metaphysical rubric that features themes of mental powers, energy, healing, and the mind-body relationship, and includes not only practices of meditation and physical wellness but also traditions popularly termed "magical" or "occult." Finally, the concept of metaphysical Asia speaks to the ways in which an interest in "Eastern spirituality" engages "world religions" such as Hinduism and Buddhism while potentially rewriting them in American conceptual vocabularies.

American metaphysical religion, while marked by claims of "universal" wisdom and spirituality, often expresses the governing prejudices of its mostly

white advocates. Among the traditions that typically undergo appropriation under the “New Age” rubric—Hinduism and yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, indigenous American religions, Amazonian shamanism, Taoism, Christian gnosticisms, Jewish Kabbalah—we do not typically encounter traditions of Africa (apart from pharaonic Egypt). Nor does the New Age pool of resources typically include Islam, beyond a particular construction of Sufism that imagines Sufi traditions and figures such as Rumi as separate from Islam.<sup>16</sup>

Parallel to the white intellectual traditions covered in Albanese’s account, there were also African American esoteric traditions that often resonated with white esotericisms and white imaginaries of a vast, undifferentiated “Orient” but sometimes differed in their resources. Susan Palmer, author of a monograph on the Nuwabians, observes that what she calls the “black cultic milieu” is essentially unknown to “white New Agers.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to white practitioners, Black metaphysical religionists have often claimed timeless and universal spiritual truths in ways that prioritized Africa (not only Egypt) and Islam (not only Sufism) as their centers. In the early twentieth century, the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south into northern cities provoked transformations of African-derived hoodoo tradition, characterized by increasing commercialization in a metaphysical marketplace of mail-order companies and individual practitioners advertising goods and services in Black newspapers. Practitioners claiming titles such as “African scientist,” “Mohammedan scientist,” “Mohammedan Master of Stricter African Science,” and “Arabian Mystic Seer and Master of the Ancient Mysteries,” and claiming origins in Nigeria, Zulu South Africa, and the Sudan advertised their expertise to serve clients’ medical, spiritual, and magical needs.<sup>18</sup> These Africa-centering practitioners did not exist in a separate universe from Black religious thought and liberation struggles. The patron of occult “African science” could also have an interest in the glories of ancient Black civilizations, the true place of Black people in the Bible, the Egyptian and Ethiopian origins of Freemasonry, Black liberation in the United States, and anticolonial movements across the globe. The question of Jesus Christ’s true race, esoteric reinterpretations of Christ’s divinity and recovery of his “lost years” spent undergoing initiation in Egypt and India, the lost “Oriental” powers of occult African, “Mohammedan,” and “Hindoo” sciences, and resistance against both domestic and worldwide white supremacy do not need to be compartmentalized into distinct “religious,” “magical,” and “political” dimensions. These concerns often occupied the same spaces and compelled the same thinkers.



Across the twentieth century, metaphysical Africa developed as a tradition of sacred geographies and enchanted genealogies, affirming Blackness as a unique spiritual gift and destiny. Melanin theorists argued that thanks to greater melanin concentrations in the pineal gland, Black people were naturally inclined toward greater mental, emotional, and physical wellness, extraordinary philosophical insight, sensitivity to other humans' magnetic fields, and the ability to access information from unexpected places—as in Frances Cress Welsing's claim that George Washington Carver obtained his botanical knowledge from the plants themselves, as they “talked to his melanin.” In Afrocentric thought, melanin theory sometimes serves as a counter to “ancient aliens” narratives that reduce human agency and attribute marvels of the ancient world to extraterrestrial intervention. While white occult writer Robert K. G. Temple argued that the Dogon tribe in Mali possessed advanced knowledge of the star Sirius B that could only be attributed to the tribe's tutelage under extraterrestrial teachers, Welsing suggested that the Dogon achieved this knowledge independently through their extrasensory intuition, a power credited to superior pineal glands.<sup>19</sup>

This “metaphysical Africa” can also include Egyptocentrism, the identification of pharaonic Egypt with Black Africanity, particularly the construction of biological, historical, and spiritual or philosophical linkages between pharaonic Egypt and African diasporas in the Americas.<sup>20</sup> Egyptocentrism (and Egyptosophy, a romanticization of ancient Egypt as the original source of all esoteric and/or occult knowledge)<sup>21</sup> has become a prominent dimension of Afrocentrist thought, though Afrocentrism and Egyptocentrism should not be conflated and sometimes even appear in tension with each other. Some Afrocentrists prefer the wisdom traditions of Yoruba over those of the pharaohs, or identify with enslaved Hebrews rather than with their Egyptian oppressors.<sup>22</sup> The African Hebrew Israelite community founded by Ben Ammi in the 1960s, to take just one sample from a diverse pool of Black Hebrew traditions, identifies Israel as “northeast Africa.”<sup>23</sup> Other seekers of metaphysical Africa, envisioning the entire continent as a singular cultural entity, conceive of a comprehensive “African spirituality” that includes Yoruba and Kemetism, as well as the African roots of “Abrahamic” religions. Advocates of African spiritualities might assert that the West has unfairly misrepresented indigenous traditions of Egyptian *neteru* and Yoruba *orishas* as polytheistic, or instead defend polytheism against Western monotheist hegemony; these claims can also appear in the same argument.<sup>24</sup>

Islam entered into this matrix through various portals: occult practitioners who envisioned Africa as a land of magical, mysterious “Mohammedan science”; Masonic orders’ appropriations of Islam to evoke a “mystic Orient”;<sup>25</sup> non-Muslim writers such as J. A. Rogers and Edward Blyden, who praised the “Muslim world” as a realm of greater egalitarianism and historical Black glory; transnational Ahmadiyya networks and other Muslim diasporas; and what Cemil Aydin terms a “Third World internationalism” characterized by interactions between anticolonial, pan-Islamist, and pan-Asianist movements throughout the world. Aydin points to the encounter in London between Caribbean pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey and Sudanese-Egyptian pan-Islamist Duse Mohamed Ali, and their continued collaboration when Ali visited Garvey in the United States.<sup>26</sup> American visions of Islam as innately connected to Blackness did not develop from one singular root, but rather from a multiplicity of entangled genealogies. In Duse Mohamed Ali’s *African Times and Orient Review*, we find writings by Muslim religious reformers, pan-Africanists, and pan-Asianists, but also by theosophists such as Annie Besant, whom the journal praised as “among the first rank of sane thinkers.”<sup>27</sup>

Muslim movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam emerged from this context of polyculturalism, transnational connections, and creative activity. Noble Drew Ali engaged New Thought narratives of Jesus as an initiate of mystery schools, composed his *Holy Koran* by appropriating metaphysical texts such as Levi H. Dowling’s *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, and claimed mystical initiation at the Pyramid of Cheops. As an Islamic prophet, he taught African Americans that they were not “Negroes” but rather Moors and “Moslems,” and that he was divinely chosen to restore their lost nationality and religion. A close read of the Supreme Wisdom Lessons, the teachings of Nation of Islam founder Master Fard Muhammad and his student successor, Elijah Muhammad, reveals metaphysical webs in which the Nation developed, engaging popular imaginaries of Moses as a master occultist and Jesus as a mystery school initiate, as well as New Age discourses on the power of the mind, magnetic attraction, and godhood as realization of one’s inner nature.<sup>28</sup> The Lessons did not present their knowledge as new or historically specific, but rather as the timeless truth of a primordial, self-created Black Man who was a “righteous Muslim” by his very nature.

Elijah Muhammad’s vision of Islam informed his vision of Blackness. As Edward E. Curtis IV has observed, the Nation “constructed black identity in terms of a shared history that was defined by its Islamic character.”<sup>29</sup> This construction both opened and limited the Nation’s encounter with African

cultures and spiritualities. While Elijah Muhammad conceptualized Blackness as eternal and divine, he was by no means an Afrocentrist. Elijah recognized pharaonic Egypt as a Black achievement, but his ideas about non-Muslim African cultures also upheld white supremacist tropes. Elijah's "Asiatic" Blackness was definitively *not* African; while Ben Ammi reconceptualized Israel as "northeast Africa," Elijah redefined the African continent as "East Asia." The Messenger spoke disparagingly of non-Muslim African cultures and condemned the "savage dress and hair-styles" of African cultural revivalism in the 1960s, lamenting that many Black people in America, seeking the "love of Black Africa," had embraced "the jungle life."<sup>30</sup>

The Nation's aspirations toward globalized Muslim "orthodoxy" after Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, coupled with immigration reform that radically changed American Muslim demographics, altered the relation between Islam and Blackness. In the later twentieth century, numerous Afrocentrist intellectuals viewed Islam as an alien culture of Arab supremacy that had only entered Africa via invasion and slavery. Afrocentrists subjected Islam to the same critiques with which the Nation had denounced Christianity, presenting Islam as non-Black and even as a force of anti-Blackness. In what Sherman Jackson has termed "Black Orientalism," conversion to Islam lost much of its capital as a performance of Black "racial/cultural 'orthodoxy,'" becoming repositioned as an embrace of Arab and South Asian cultures and even as a rejection of Blackness. When "Blackamerican Muslims began to show signs of being culturally and intellectually overrun by immigrants," Jackson writes, "they began to draw the charge of cultural apostasy."<sup>31</sup> For many who sought to recover an indigenous African spirituality, Islam became untenable.

While some Afrocentrists treated Islam as inauthentically African, many Muslim communities also treated Black African cultures as illegitimate experiences of Islam. Writing on troubled histories between Black and Muslim identities, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer argues that amid "chronic disavowal" of Blackness in Muslim communities, "American Muslims, Blacks and non-Blacks, rarely think of Africa as an archive for Islamic authenticity and authority," and "Africa (save Egypt, Morocco, and Mauritania) has been effectively erased from the Islamic tradition."<sup>32</sup> As scholarly networks associated with the Salafiyya movement came to represent a dominant school of thought in Black Sunni communities, particularly in cities of the northeastern United States, numerous Black converts traveled to Saudi Arabia for religious training and returned home as authoritative community leaders. In the 1980s, the Saudi government established a "satellite school" in Virginia to prepare Americans for study at

the Islamic University of Madinah. As Saudi Arabia became increasingly privileged as the archive of “true Islam,” local traditions of Black Islam were further marginalized as heretical and illegitimate.<sup>33</sup> In turn, this trend bolstered Afrocentrist repudiations of Islam as Arab cultural hegemony.

A controversy of critical importance to the Ansaru Allah Community was Islam’s place in metaphysical Africa. The AAC/NIH can be found at a nexus of competing priorities, as Al Mahdi invoked a metaphysical Africa that upheld Islam as timelessly Black. The AAC/NIH constructed a metaphysical Africa that affirmed and absorbed Afrocentric objections to “orthodox” Islam as a legacy of Arab violence against Black people, but also relocated Islam’s true heartland in the Sudan—*bilad as-sudan*, translated in AAC/NIH literature as “Land of the Blacks.” Between anti-Islamic Afrocentrism and Muslim anti-Blackness, or between Black Orientalism and Black Salafism, AAC/NIH media navigated these conflicts in complex and compelling ways. This book explores various ways in which the AAC/NIH, formulating truth through its own metaphysical Africa, envisioned the connection between Blackness and Islam.

#### REINTRODUCING ANSAR HISTORY

The AAC/NIH began not as a “spinoff” or “offshoot” of movements such as the Nation of Islam or Moorish Science, but rather as a small circle of young Sunni Muslims in Brooklyn with links to the State Street Mosque led by Granada-born Daoud Ahmed Faisal (d. 1980). Faisal established the Islamic Mission of America (IMA) in 1928. The IMA identified as Sunni, though Pat Bowen observes that “Sunni” signified “the Muslim world in general” rather than a concrete sectarian identity, noting that the IMA relied on translations of the Qur’an that came through networks of the Ahmadiyya—a South Asian Muslim movement scorned and persecuted as “heretical” throughout the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> By the early 1960s, friction between immigrant and Black segments at State Street inspired a handful of Black members to leave under the leadership of Hafis Mahbub, a Pakistani member of the Sunni revivalist Tablighi Jama’at who had taught at the masjid. These attritioned State Street members formed the Ya-Sin Mosque, which claimed a more strict adherence to Muslim legal traditions (characterized in part by women’s use of full-face veils) while also addressing the specific needs of African American Muslims, and later gave rise to the Dar ul-Islam movement.<sup>35</sup>

The future Al Imam Isa Al Haadi Al Mahdi, then Dwight York (b. 1945), spent part of his teens and early twenties connected to State Street Mosque. The

circumstances of Al Mahdi's conversion remain disputed. It has been claimed that Al Mahdi's introduction to Islam came through members of the Nation, whom he reportedly encountered during a 1965–67 incarceration for felony assault and other charges. This narrative seems to start with Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, who provides no details of Al Mahdi's criminal history but simply remarks, "In prison it may be presumed that Al Mahdi came in contact with Elijah Muhammad's teachings as well as those of Noble Drew Ali's," after which he converted at State Street and began to "concoct" a "black nationalist version of Islaam."<sup>36</sup> If Al Mahdi had converted in Brooklyn "around 1965," as Philips suggests, this would have been before his incarceration, not after his release. Resisting the prison conversion narrative, Al Mahdi would claim that he first attended State Street's Friday prayers in 1957, at the age of twelve, when Faisal essentially took him in as a son and renamed him Isa 'Abd'Allah ibn Abu Bakr Muhammad.<sup>37</sup> Paul Greenhouse, a documentary filmmaker who has done extensive fieldwork with the community, encountered reliable claims that his mother was already a member of State Street Mosque, and that in the late 1960s Al Mahdi would walk up and down the street to perform public dhikr, the recitation of divine names, with a talking drum.<sup>38</sup>

At State Street Mosque, Al Mahdi would have encountered Sufis, Salafi revivalists, former Nation and Moorish Science Temple members, white converts (probably including author Maryam Jameelah, who converted at State Street in May 1961, received her new name from Faisal himself, and became a close friend of Faisal's wife, Khadijah),<sup>39</sup> followers of Sayyid Abu A'la al-Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, Tablighi Jama'at networks, UN diplomats from Muslim-majority countries, and various diasporic communities that had started with Muslim seamen. Of particular relevance for Al Mahdi, State Street's Muslim diasporas included a Sudanese-American community that had been planting roots in Brooklyn since the arrival of merchant marines in the 1940s. Anthropologist Rogaiia Mustafa Abusharaf reports that these seamen came from Dongola, the same part of the Sudan that Al Mahdi later claimed as his own place of origin, and regarded State Street Mosque as their "home away from home." Some had learned of Satti Majid, the Dongolawi scholar who traveled to the United States with a vision of spreading Islam, connected with Yemeni Muslims in Brooklyn, and mentored Faisal before leaving the country in 1929.<sup>40</sup> Faisal's establishment of his Islamic Mission, writes Abusharaf, "marked the birth of an African Muslim religious body in North America." At State Street, the Dongolawis "managed to reproduce in revealing ways the community they left behind," providing Brooklyn seekers with access to an indigenous African



Islam.<sup>41</sup> Rather than an isolated bubble of local “heterodoxies” without exposure to a larger “Muslim world,” Brooklyn offered an Islamic education that was both locally embedded and transnationally connected. Among the groups accessible at State Street alone, one could choose between Islamic revivals that privileged the Sudan and Pakistan as their natural centers.

It was in this context that young Dwight York learned of Muhammad Ahmad (1845–1885), a Sufi revolutionary from Dongola who declared himself the awaited Mahdi, called for Islam’s restoration to its pure and original form, raised an army of followers, drove British and Turko-Egyptian oppressors from the Sudan, and led a short-lived Islamic state until his death in 1885. In the years during which a newly paroled York navigated State Street’s complex terrain and embarked on a path of Afrocentric Sufism, the Mahdiyya made international headlines amid political turmoil in the Sudan. When the Sudan regained its independence in 1956, the Mahdiyya, also known as Ansar (Helpers), established the National Umma Party, their own political party, and took power. In May 1969, the young government fell to a military coup led by Ja’far Muhammad al-Numayri. The following year, after a failed attempt to assassinate al-Numayri, the Ansar revolted, prompting a government assault on their stronghold at Abba Island that resulted in the massacre of a thousand Ansar. Among those killed was the Mahdi’s grandson, Imam Hadi al-Mahdi, whose nephew and successor, Sadiq al-Mahdi, fled the country. During his exile in Egypt, Sadiq articulated the Ansar platform against the Muslim Brothers; while the Brothers relied on a “traditional pattern” and conformed “to the Sunni school of thought and are bound by the four Sunni schools of law,” the Ansar, Sadiq explained, “draw from all schools of thought and we are not bound by any school of law. We recognize the original texts and seek new formulation, conscious of changes in time and place.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition to Brooklyn’s Sudanese community, the future Al Mahdi would have encountered visions of African spirituality from non-Muslim diasporic networks. New York was home to a Yoruba spiritual and cultural revivalist movement driven by increased Caribbean migration and African American conversions to Afro-Cuban traditions. Black converts to Santeria, recognizing that West African traditions had been transformed by their diffusion across the Atlantic, shifted attention from Cuba to West Africa and sought to “purify” African traditions. As Yoruba revivalists pursued linkages to an “older primordial moment in Africa,” Tracey E. Hucks explains, they produced a distinctly American construction of African spirituality.<sup>43</sup>

When the Harlem-based Yoruba Temple disseminated literature that offered “reconnection to the continent of Africa, and a rationalization for the collective return to African religion and culture,” this vision of Africa did not include Islam.<sup>44</sup> Against Nation and Sunni leaders alike who disparaged non-Muslim African societies as “primitive” and presented Islam as a “civilizing” influence, Yoruba Temple media implicated Islam in the erasure of indigenous African cultures.<sup>45</sup> Speaking to the various legacies of Malcolm X, however, the Yoruba Temple honored Malcolm’s birthday a year after his assassination with a parade through Harlem.<sup>46</sup> According to one of Greenhouse’s informants within Al Mahdi’s circle, another point of intersection between New York’s Muslims and Yoruba Temple was Al Mahdi’s own mother, who reportedly participated in a Yoruba revivalist community while also attending State Street Mosque.

Yoruba Temple literature made claims of its own about the Sudan. In *Tribal Origins of African-Americans* (1962), Yoruba leader Oseijeman Adefunmi argued that West African cultures bore ancestral connections to ancient Egyptian and Nubian kingdoms, as European invasions of North Africa provoked mass migrations across the Sahara (which Adefunmi labeled a greater “Sudan”). Specifically, Adefunmi reported that Yoruba ancestry could be traced to the ancient Nile city of Meroë, capital of the Kushite kingdom and a little more than one hundred miles from modern Khartoum, which meant that many of the West Africans taken to the Americas as slaves were Nubians.<sup>47</sup>

Back in Brooklyn, Al Mahdi’s public drum/dhikr marches and private study circles produced a new faction in the State Street universe. Given a critical lack of extant sources prior to the 1970s, we must rely partially on the community’s retroactive accounts in later materials and Philips’s interviews with former members in the 1980s. With this caution in mind, it appears that circa 1967–69, Al Mahdi headed a small group called Ansar Pure Sufi and operated a “Pure Sufi” bookstore. One of Philips’s informants recalled joining in 1968 after getting “fed up” with the Dar ul-Islam and seeing Al Mahdi’s group show up at a Dar celebration of the Prophet’s birthday. They “looked different,” he recalled, with their tarbushes, nose rings, and bone earrings, and a Dar brother told him, “Stay away from them ‘cause they are crazy.” He also reported that in its early days, the group consisted of fifteen members at most, “dropping off to about five when times got rough.”<sup>48</sup> By 1969 they had become the Nubian Islamic Hebrew Mission in America (NIHMA), and in 1971 they established a headquarters at 452 Rockaway Avenue in Brooklyn’s Brownsville neighborhood, approximately a mile from the Dar’s Atlantic Avenue masjid.<sup>49</sup>

As among the Dar, NIHMA women fully veiled their faces. The male members of NIHMA became known for peddling literature and other products throughout New York, dressing in distinct uniforms, and visiting other masjids to engage Muslims on issues of doctrine.<sup>50</sup> “When you see Nubian brothers on the street,” explained a 1972 issue of the periodical the *Muslim Man*, “you’ll notice that they wear tall black tarbushes [with green tassels], clean neat suits that button down the front, or the familiar *selawa*. With the silver nose rings and signet rings, their dress alone tells you a lot about the Muslim man.”<sup>51</sup>

The earliest surviving NIHMA pamphlets attribute authorship to Al Mahdi under the name Isa Abd Allah ibn Abu Bakr Muhammad, and they typically begin with the page-one declaration, “Muslims must realize they are alone in Their Sorrow.” Contrary to narratives of constant reinvention, early NIHMA newsletters express remarkable consistency with later material. *Back to the Beginning: The Book of Names* (1972), for example, informs readers that Adam was Black; that African Americans were descended from Kedar, son of Ishmael, who was Black and “the real Arab”; that Black people are Nubians and not only the true Arabs but also the true Hebrews; that white people are Amorites; that Muhammad Ahmad was the anticipated Mahdi; that true Muslims must abide by the Sabbath; and that hadith traditions are generally unreliable and must not be privileged over the Qur’an and other revealed scriptures, such as the Torah and Psalms. The pamphlet makes positive connections to Arabic, Hebrew, and Yoruba, and also features images of the Star of David, the Kundalini “sleeping serpent,” and the Egyptian ankh, along with a serpent eating its tail captioned “Never ending life from Africa.” A star’s six points are captioned (clockwise from the top): Allah, Shango, Obatala, Man, Elohim, YHWH.<sup>52</sup> In other pamphlets from the early 1970s, Al Mahdi articulates themes that remained crucial to his teachings for decades to come, such as the notion of Black suffering as the spell of Leviathan, Al Mahdi breaking the spell in 1970, and a promise that Black oppression would end in the year 2000. In early publications, Al Mahdi also asserts that white people (Amorites) are cursed with leprosy and pale skin.<sup>53</sup> In harmony with his later writings on Jesus, he interprets the Qur’an and Bible to argue that the angel Gabriel had intercourse with Mary and was Jesus’s biological father.<sup>54</sup>

Speaking to divisions affecting Muslim Brooklyn, NIHMA newsletters proclaimed a need for the Black man to “speak his own language,” meaning “Arabic or Kufic in its purest form” rather than the corrupted “Pakistanian Arabic” and other diluted forms learned from immigrant Muslims.<sup>55</sup> These newsletters established connections between Islam and Africa that remained

major concerns in AAC/NIH media for decades, expressed in Al Mahdi's vision of the Sudan as the center of divine creative activity, his treatment of "Sudan" as a name for the whole of Africa, his incorporation of the ankh, and his claims that Yoruba traditions derive from Islam.<sup>56</sup> The connections found shared expression in advertisements from his NIH "tribe" for a June 4, 1972, festival at 452 Rockaway that promised "dress of Islamic countries," Islamic poetry, the "Al Ansaru Allah Dance Troupe," African drumming, and Merchants of Oyo—a group led by Al Mahdi's brother, Obaba Oyo (born David Piper York Jr.), that sold African imports (including bone jewelry that AAC/NIH members wore for a time) and Islamic literature, and traveled the country showcasing Oyo's jewelry designs.<sup>57</sup> Oyo, who also worked as a fashion designer for the Harlem-based New Breed Clothing brand, which popularized dashikis in the 1960s, formed his own African Islamic Mission (AIM) in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. An AIM pamphlet from 1975 identifies Oyo's family as "Islamic Hebrew" and quotes Genesis to prophesy that Black suffering under the "iniquity of the Amorites" would end in the year 2000.<sup>58</sup> The AIM became known for reprinting books on Black history and Islam, both popular books and rare and out-of-print titles, ranging from general history and cultural materials, to Nation of Islam and Moorish Science texts, to the writings of Muslim apologist Ahmed Deedat, to classical proto-Afrocentrist works.<sup>59</sup>

NIHMA pamphlets defended the right of American Muslims to identify with Sufism, lamenting that "many Muslims are under the impression, and are indoctrinating others with the fallacy that you must be from the East in order to elevate yourself to the degree of a Sufi."<sup>60</sup> Al Mahdi's Sufism identified Khidr as Melchizedek, the immortal priest mentioned in the Hebrew Bible; located the "Temple of Khidr" at the seventh heaven;<sup>61</sup> and described the progressive opening of chakras as the soul's ascension toward the plane of divine reality ("Allah and Al Khidr") and then the seventh and final plane of Blackness.<sup>62</sup> Al Mahdi affirmed the Nation and Five Percenter declaration "the Black Man is God" but nuanced its theological impact by distinguishing between "God" and "Allah," which Al Mahdi did not regard as simply a matter of straightforward translation. For Al Mahdi, these terms signified different things: "God" did not refer to the transcendent creator of the worlds but was an acronym for Gomar Oz Dubar, three "Kufic" words meaning wisdom, strength, and beauty. The Black man is God because he has been granted these attributes; Allah, however, is giver of the attributes and cannot be contained within them.<sup>63</sup>

In the early 1970s, Al Mahdi identified himself as the grandson of the Sudanese Mahdi,<sup>64</sup> presented his organization as an authorized branch of Faisal's

Islamic Mission of America,<sup>65</sup> and constructed an Islamic Egyptosophy with the narrative that Hajar, mother of Ishmael, was the daughter of Imhotep.<sup>66</sup> Whether for his teachings, fashion choices, or aggressive proselytizing and peddling, Al Mahdi attracted negative attention from other Muslim groups in the city. In the summer of 1973, followers of Al Mahdi were attacked by a group from the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (MIB), a Black Sunni movement based in Harlem, for peddling newspapers in Manhattan; four MIB members were arrested.<sup>67</sup> The MIB complained in a September 1973 editorial of “numerous little cults” linking Islam with “eccentric nonsense,” “mythology and esoteric foolishness” that resembled “the more barbaric aspects of primitive pagan societies.” The editorial specifically targeted the AAC/NIH in its mention of “cult” followers wearing “rings in their noses, bones in their ears,” which were elements of AAC/NIH dress code at the time.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Al Mahdi presented himself during the early 1970s as exhibiting greater compatibility with Black Sunni movements than with the Nation of Islam: “To all those Muslims who for the past three years have found and are still finding fault with us, at least we proclaim the Kalimah of ALLAH and adhere to the Five Pillars of Faith.”<sup>69</sup>

AAC/NIH pamphlets from 1973, identifying the community as the Nubian Islamic Hebrews, also display the designation “Al Ansaru Allah, the Helper of Allah.” On the back cover, these pamphlets offer a manifesto titled “Goals and Purposes of the Nubian Islamic Hebrews” to parallel the mission statements found in the Nation of Islam’s *Muhammad Speaks* and in the newspapers of Sunni groups such as the Islamic Party of North America. “Goals and Purposes” declares the intention to teach children “Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and all the African dialect as they can learn” and to incorporate practices of “African drumming, Islamic drumming, Chanting, and dancing,” and expresses an ultimate ambition to “go home, to build our own country which is in Africa.” The statement also defines the group as “non-sectarian” and as committed to “Islam in its pristine purity as taught by the Qur’an and the Sunnah.”<sup>70</sup>

Community literature from the later 1970s describes the period of 1970–74 as the first half of a “tribulation,” during which the devil infiltrated the community and caused desertions.<sup>71</sup> In February 1974, months before Al Mahdi instituted the practice of begging for donations, the movement struggled: during the New York Police Department (NYPD)’s investigation of a shooting at the Ya-Sin Mosque that left four dead, a grocery store owner identified with the “Islamic Hebrews” told detectives that his group no longer used its St. John’s Place location and did not have a masjid at the moment but owned



a green bus and gathered at the homes of its members.<sup>72</sup> During the “tribulation” period, Al Mahdi traveled to the Middle East and Africa, where he made a pilgrimage to Mecca and experienced a mystical vision of Khidr/Melchizedek at the junction of the two Niles in the Sudan. These travels seem to correspond to the community’s phasing out its Nubian Islamic Hebrews name in favor of Ansaru Allah Community.<sup>73</sup> Mailing addresses that appear in the pamphlets of this period also suggest at least a coincidental relationship between the name change and the move from the Rockaway apartment to 496 Flatbush.<sup>74</sup> Surprisingly, given the spirit of Al Mahdi’s usual treatment of Saudi Arabia, pamphlets published shortly before and after the move also feature the Saudi coat of arms on their back covers, in addition to Al Mahdi’s own six-pointed star and upward-pointing crescent.<sup>75</sup>

The Ansaru Allah name affirmed links to the Sudanese Ansar, which also accompanied the adoption of new dress codes for the “Ansar of the West” that more closely mirrored the “Ansar of the East.” Overall, the community’s rhetorical strategies remained consistent. NIHMA literature had already recognized Muhammad Ahmad as the Mahdi, prioritized Khidr as a mediator between worlds, identified Al Mahdi as a direct “student under Sheik Al-Khidr of Nubia,” and even depicted Al Mahdi as a miracle worker with supernatural insights and powers.<sup>76</sup> Community media continued to advocate biblical scriptures as essential to Muslim life (arguing that Muhammad only adhered to the way of Abraham and *fitrah*, “the natural practices of all the Prophets”) and maintained the six-pointed star and upward-pointing crescent as its symbol.<sup>77</sup>

From the later 1970s through 1983, the group identified itself as Ansaru Allah (often transliterated in double-vowel style as Ansaaru Allah). This name did not erase the community’s prior history, deny previous NIHMA teachings, or mark a new emphasis on “Islam” over “Judaism.” Reflecting on the community’s earlier identification, a 1978 editorial remarked, “In between the years 1970 and mid-1973, we were known as Nubian Islamic Hebrews. And we do not deny that we still are.”<sup>78</sup> Considering past “tribulations” in the newsletter titled *Id with the Ansars* (1977), Al Mahdi explains, “We did not propagate the Scriptures as profoundly” as the community did later in the decade. “We started out with Genesis . . . as we became more knowledgeable of the Scriptures . . . [we] worked our way through the Old Testament and the New Testament up to the Qur’an, into which we are now delving heavily.”<sup>79</sup> Al Mahdi’s claim of progressing through Hebrew and Christian scriptures to a Qur’an-centered methodology, however, does not correspond with the community’s observable rhetorical strategies; in *Id with the Ansars*, the newsletter that makes this claim,

Al Mahdi's New Testament citations (primarily from the book of Revelation, which he identifies as Christ's *Injil*, mentioned in the Qur'an) are nearly double the combined references to passages from the Hebrew Bible and Qur'an.<sup>80</sup>

Siddiq Muhammad, Philips's informant who had joined the movement in 1968, reports that around June 1974, as Al Mahdi's command that followers beg on the streets led to a massive flood of revenue, "things started to really change."<sup>81</sup> A short passage in *Id with the Ansars* hints that an intellectual shift had also occurred in the community—not an abrupt turn from one religious identity to another, but rather an intensified focus on Al Mahdi himself. The community's investigations of scripture had produced new understandings of its leader's significance, as "the Lamb (Al Masih) has become known to the people as the person he was prophesied to be, rather than by what he calls himself."<sup>82</sup>

Literature from the late 1970s reports that Al Mahdi (born in 1945, an even century after the birth of the Sudanese Mahdi)<sup>83</sup> launched his movement in 1970 (a century after the Mahdi established his mission), upon the opening of the seventh seal mentioned in the book of Revelation. While sources from earlier in the decade present Al Mahdi as the Mahdi's grandson, 1977's *Muhammad Ahmad: The Only True Mahdi!* and later materials name him as the Mahdi's great-grandson.<sup>84</sup> The seventh seal signified the Qur'an, which was "opened" with Al Mahdi's arrival as its master translator and interpreter. His mission was to teach the 144,000 helpers of Allah (Ansar Allah) in preparation for Christ's return in the year 2000. While AAC publications such as *Al Imaam Isa Visits Egypt 1981* featured a photo of Al Mahdi with the caption "Our Savior Has Returned," Al Mahdi's precise connection to Christ remained so ambiguous that some apparently believed that Al Mahdi identified himself as the returning Jesus. Al Mahdi insists in *I Don't Claim to Be . . .* (1981) that he "never claimed to be Christ" and that his pamphlets were misunderstood. He explained that Jesus would not return as an embodied reincarnation, but that the *spirit* of Jesus would "descend into a person" and then "disperse amongst his followers," the 144,000 foretold in Revelation as followers of Muhammad's household, his *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>85</sup> Al Mahdi also deployed Jesus during this period to articulate his relationship to Elijah Muhammad; the first appearance of Jesus was heralded by John the Baptist, who was endowed with the spirit of the biblical Elijah. Al Mahdi (whose first name, Isa, is the Arabic equivalent of Jesus) thereby projected the relationship between Elijah/John and Jesus onto Elijah Muhammad and himself.<sup>86</sup>

In AAC literature dating from the late 1970s through the 1980s, we can observe themes relating to esoteric knowledge and advanced technology

in ancient Egypt, emphasis on a globalizing Black Islam that featured both the Sudanese Mahdiyya and Elijah Muhammad as key ingredients, antagonism toward Arab Sunnis and their African American “puppets,” discussions of chakras and other New Age reference points, and claims of Al Mahdi’s interaction with several transcendent figures, including Khidr, Jesus, ancient pharaohs, and extraterrestrial sages. These themes do not follow one another in distinct “phases” but can be found in the same publications, along with continued commitments to “traditional” Islamic knowledge marked in part by details such as commitment to Maliki jurisprudence<sup>87</sup> and the study of classical Arabic.

Again, changes in names and symbols have limited illustrative power. A number of publications from 1982 refer to the movement as United Muslims in Exile, though this name change did not reflect a reorientation of discourse or practice or supplant Ansaru Allah as the movement’s identity. Nor did the AAC/NIH’s changes of symbols and flags consistently signify new doctrinal orientations, though these changes sometimes corresponded to shifting claims and the visual cultures of its opponents. Around the turn of the 1980s, the community used a white, green, red, and black flag bearing the *shahadah* (testimony to Allah’s oneness and the prophethood of Muhammad), along with the double-bladed sword of ‘Ali. This design echoed the MIB flag, which displayed the *shahadah* in the same style of Arabic with a single-bladed sword. Ironically, it was the MIB, not the Ansar, that employed a black, red, and green color scheme (as opposed to the Garveyite pan-Africanist flag, which consisted of the same colors but positioned the red stripe above the black) and gave as its flag’s inspiration the Sudanese Mahdiyya (while being careful to explain that Muhammad Ahmad, a “great champion of justice,” was “known to many as the Mahdi” without acknowledging that he personally claimed that title for himself).<sup>88</sup>

From 1983 to 1987, community literature simultaneously used the names Ansaru Allah Community and Nubian Islamic Hebrews. It was also during this time that Al Mahdi added “Al Haadi” to his name, becoming As Sayyid Al Imaam Isa Al Haadi Al Mahdi and emphasizing his claim to be the son of Muhammad Ahmad’s son Sayyid Hadi Abdulrahman al-Mahdi (1918–1971). In 1984, Al Mahdi established a Sufi order, Sons of the Green Light, which he promoted throughout AAC/NIH literature as adjacent to the larger community. From 1987 to 1991, without erasing its Ansar identity, the community rebranded itself the Original Tents of Kedar. It was as the Original Tents of Kedar that the community adopted the Mahdiyya flag.<sup>89</sup>

During the late 1980s, the character of Yanaan/Yaanuwn, who was first mentioned at least as early as 1983 as an intergalactic sheikh who sometimes occupied Al Mahdi's body, entered into new prominence and became increasingly identified with Al Mahdi. Original Tents of Kedar books frequently display an image of Al Mahdi with the Ansar masjid and a flying saucer in the background and a caption identifying him as "As Sayyid Isa Al Haadi Al Mahdi (Yanaan)."<sup>90</sup> When asked, "Who is Yanuwn?" during a session open to the public circa 1988, Al Mahdi confirmed, "I am an extraterrestrial incarnated."<sup>91</sup> Al Mahdi's 1991 commentary on the book of Revelation claims that Yanaan is the nineteenth elder in Khidr's order, and also an appearance of Khidr himself in human form.<sup>92</sup> In his interpretation of Rev. 1:7 ("Here he is coming upon the clouds"), Al Mahdi reveals that the Buraq, Muhammad's steed during his ascension, was not a winged animal but a fleet of spaceships within the Mothership, which will descend to earth to gather the saved 144,000.<sup>93</sup>

A survey of AAC/NIH media from the 1970s to the early 1990s reveals considerable stability. Despite changes in name, flag, symbols, and clothing, the AAC/NIH did not abandon the resources that had previously authorized its truth claims in favor of a whole new set of materials. In a single pamphlet from 1983, Al Mahdi hits notes that observers would treat as marking separate phases of his career, presenting his body as a medium through which Khidr, Jesus, an ancient Egyptian pharaoh, and Yanaan speak. Rather than presume that Al Mahdi's choices perform a postmodernist mysticism designed to break down all categories and produce enlightenment through incoherence, we can examine the ways in which items related to one another within the particularities of his own toolbox and the world of preexisting connections that made this toolbox possible—and even intelligible—to a community.

At the start of the 1990s, Al Mahdi and numerous followers relocated to the community's Jazzir Abba campground in the Catskills (named after Abba Island in the Sudan). Rebranding Jazzir Abba as Mount Zion, Al Mahdi also changed his own name to Rabboni Y'shua Bar El Haady and embarked on reforms that led observers to call this period his "Jewish" phase. Shortly thereafter, the community relocated en masse to Georgia. Material from 1992–93 identifies the community as the Tents of Abraham or Tents of Nubia, renames Al Mahdi Dr. Malachi Z. York or affectionately calls him the Lamb (again, a designation used for him since the 1970s),<sup>94</sup> and tells a story of the movement's changes. At Mount Zion in 1992, York reportedly informed community members that they would "stop living the life of a Muslim" because Islam was about to become

increasingly associated with terrorism, and Sunni Arabs would never accept African American Muslims as equals.<sup>95</sup>

In 1993, the community, having adopted the name Holy Tabernacle Ministries, migrated to its Tama Re commune in Eatonton, Georgia. Post-1993 media intensified York's attention to pharaonic Egypt, new resources such as ancient Sumerian religion, indigenous American sovereignty movements, and narratives of extraterrestrial civilizations, while simultaneously denigrating and reconstructing Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. In the second half of the 1990s, the community came to be known as the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors (UNNM). York also led numerous Masonic lodges, such as the Ancient and Mystic Order of Melchizedek, which adhered to the lessons of his earlier Sufi order and simply switched out references to Khidr with Melchizedek (a move consistent with York's historical conceptualization of the figure).

York regularly acknowledged his Brooklyn past, often explaining, "I came giving you what you wanted, so you would want what I have to give."<sup>96</sup> Though the community had always acknowledged changes in name, symbol, and prescribed dress, and made claims of an intellectual progression, it was only after the move to Georgia that York retroactively spoke of his mission as having passed through a sequence of distinct phases or "schools." Amid these narratives of change, however, there are continuities. Even in his ostensibly "post-Islamic" work, while distributing lecture tapes with titles such as "Islam Is Poison," York still praised figures such as Elijah Muhammad and Daoud Faisal, claimed a connection to the Sudanese Mahdiyya, treated the Qur'an as a meaningful source for his teachings, and wrote of restoring Islam to its "pristine purity."<sup>97</sup>

In 2004, roughly two years after his arrest and the government raid on Tama Re, York was convicted of multiple charges relating to RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) conspiracy, including racketeering and the interstate transportation of minors for sexual abuse. In 2005, upon government confiscation of the land, bulldozers purged Tama Re of its pyramids and statues. In the years since York's conviction, Nuwaubians have sought to free him through a number of strategies, including assertions of his innocence and claims that his trial was illegitimate, by challenging federal jurisdiction, whether on the grounds of legal sovereignty (as a Native American tribal leader) or diplomatic immunity (as a Liberian consul). While increasingly decentralized and intellectually diverse, the community continues to develop without his physical presence.



The chapters of this book focus on various resources and strategies through which AAC/NIH formulated and communicated its truth. Chapter 1 explores key themes in Al Mahdi's metaphysical Africa. It discusses Al Mahdi's construction of the Sudan as a land of mystical knowledge, deeply connected to human origins and the coming fulfillment of divine plan; as a refuge for Muhammad's "unmistakenly black" daughter Fatima and son-in-law 'Ali, as they fled persecution by "pale Arabs" Abu Bakr and his daughter A'isha; as an archive of timeless Islamic knowledge, because Fatima and 'Ali left secret scriptures in the protection of Nubian custody; as the center of the modern Nubian Islamic revolution against both European and Turko-Egyptian exploitation and oppression; and as the site from which Al Mahdi found his footing in the American context, from which to navigate between anti-Muslim Afrocentrism and the anti-Blackness of encroaching Arab and South Asian Sunni hegemonies.

Chapter 2 examines the ways in which Al Mahdi constructed an ostensibly contradictory genealogy of forerunners—most significantly Elijah Muhammad and Al Mahdi's Sunni mentor, Sheikh Daoud Faisal—that includes Noble Drew Ali, Malcolm X, Allah (the former Clarence 13X), and Marcus Garvey (whom Al Mahdi claims had become Muslim), all of whom appear as figures of authorization in his claim to inherit a singular tradition of Nubian Islam in the West.

Chapter 3 complicates the popular narrative, put forth in academic literature and retroactively embraced in community media, that the AAC/NIH passed through distinct "Muslim" and "Jewish" phases. Apart from a period in 1992–93 in which the community did appear to shed coded markers of its Muslim identity (such as turbans for men and face veils for women) in favor of practices that could code as Jewish (such as Al Mahdi changing his title from imam to rabbi and wearing a yarmulke), these various sources do not agree as to how exactly we can date the "Muslim" and "Jewish" phases. Even at different points in community literature, we find multiple ideas of when the movement was most invested in the "Hebrew" dimension of its Nubian Islamic Hebrew identity. Highlighting significant continuities in the community's literature across these allegedly distinct phases, and the ways in which the community conceptualized itself in materials contemporary to the supposed mass conversions, this chapter problematizes the notion that we can easily carve AAC/NIH history into a series of successive affiliations.

Chapter 4 focuses on a figure who became an important site of both linkage and rupture: Bilal ibn Rabah, an Ethiopian who rose to prominence as

one of the early companions of the Prophet Muhammad. In modern Muslim discourses, Bilal's legacy became particularly meaningful as evidence of Islam's racial egalitarianism. Al Mahdi, however, charged that "pale Arabs" had reduced Bilal to a condescending anti-Black stereotype—a slave who can sing—while denying the Blackness of other early Muslims, including the Prophet himself. Promising to reveal Bilal's true significance, Al Mahdi presented Bilal as protective custodian of the Mihjan, the scepter that had belonged to all of the Israelite prophets, which he carried on an epic quest from Ethiopia to Mecca in order to bequeath it to the awaited Ishmaelite prophet, Muhammad. This chapter discusses Bilal's significance in AAC/NIH discourse for the connections that he enabled between Israelite and Ishmaelite prophethood, the relevance of his Ethiopian Israelite backstory in Al Mahdi's imaginary of metaphysical Africa, and his polemical utility as Al Mahdi weaponized his legacy against "pale Arab" Sunnis and their Black allies—including W. D. Muhammad, who had briefly referred to his followers (and to African Americans at large) as "Bilalians."

Chapter 5 explores the AAC/NIH's underexamined relationship to Sufism, marked not only by its origins as Ansar Pure Sufi but also by its founding of an in-house Sufi order, Sons of the Green Light, in 1984. I argue that Al Mahdi was perhaps the most successful Sufi master in the United States through the 1970s and '80s, while academic studies of American Sufism have completely ignored his community in part because of the flawed categories and prejudices that continue to inform the study of American Islam more broadly.

Chapter 6 pushes back against the notion that the AAC/NIH embraced Egyptosophic spirituality only late in its history as part of a post-Muslim makeover. I demonstrate that an investment in pharaonic Egypt appeared early in the AAC/NIH archive and remained present throughout its overtly "Islamic" and "Jewish" material. When the community migrated to a compound that it declared its "Egypt in the West" and decorated the property with sphinxes, ankhs, and pyramids, this reflected not a sudden embrace of Egyptosophy out of nowhere but rather the turning of a rhetorical dial that the community already possessed.

Chapter 7 examines the community's exodus from New York to rural Georgia in 1993 and its development as the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors (UNNM). This chapter surveys key themes of Nuwaubian discourse that are typically taken to highlight the "random" and "incoherent" nature of the community's narratives—Egyptosophy, UFO religion, claims of Native American heritage, and Freemasonry—and calls attention to the various ways in which these themes are historically linked both within the community's own

archive and in broader African American intellectual traditions. Things certainly do change, but I resist the assumption that the Nuwaubian-era community has surrendered its attempt to achieve a rationally satisfying argument or a meaningful narrative of its own history.

Chapter 8 examines Al Mahdi's theories of music and sound and briefly expands the scope of community media to include artists whose work may or may not have been published by official AAC/NIH institutions. While Al Mahdi did own a recording studio and music label, and made use of music in numerous ways (and was even an aspiring R&B star himself), not all artists who disseminated AAC/NIH messages in pop culture did so through his personal resources in the music industry. Though the Five Percenter presence in hip-hop has been extensively documented, the AAC/NIH made a substantial contribution to hip-hop culture that has gone largely unnoticed. This chapter seeks to make a critical intervention in a growing body of scholarship that examines hip-hop's varied relationships to Islam but has thus far ignored Al Mahdi's community.

In the coda, I offer a short reflection on the arguments advanced in preceding chapters and the key themes of the work, particularly the problems of overemphasizing the community's apparent instability and engaging the eclecticism of its archive through frameworks of "syncretism."

Before we proceed, a few notes, the first regarding names. As the community identified itself as the Ansaru Allah Community (AAC) and/or Nubian Islamic Hebrews (NIH) for most of its history prior to the government's raid on Tama Re, sometimes privileging one name over the other, I usually refer to it as the AAC/NIH. The community's leader has become notorious for employing a plethora of aliases, but he was known for much of the period covered here (with slight variations in spelling) as As Sayyid Al Imaam Isa Al Haadi Al Mahdi. Throughout this book I generally refer to him as Al Mahdi, while occasionally using the other names he adopted when discussing those periods of his life and AAC/NIH history (he remained Al Mahdi even when literature referred to him as Isa Muhammad, for example; these names were not mutually exclusive). When discussing the community and its leader after significant transformations in the early 1990s, I use the names by which they identified themselves at that time.

Al Mahdi's names aside, the question of authorship remains complicated. AAC/NIH media usually reflect the official voice of Al Mahdi himself, though works often describe him in the third person without attribution to another author, and Al Mahdi has been accused of writing by committee. Each of Al

Mahdi's wives reportedly headed an aspect of the community's operations, meaning that one wife would have supervised the production of media content. In her memoir, Al Mahdi's former wife Ruby S. Garnett recalls the research department: "Book shelves lined the wall in that section; full of all kinds of books that . . . the sisters used to do research out of. The sisters work area was stationed right there in front of the bookshelves, and there were rows of computers where some of them sat quietly typing and looking through books and some were making photo copies of things."<sup>98</sup> One survivor of Al Mahdi's abuse informed me that it was her job to read books that he wanted to appropriate (she particularly enjoyed reading Zecharia Sitchin), and could identify content in Al Mahdi's works that she had personally written. When he spoke through these publications, Al Mahdi operated not only as an individual author but as a collective of thinkers. I am not interested in determining which materials "really" come from his own pen; nor, for that matter, am I overly concerned with the issue of Al Mahdi's plagiarizing material from outside sources. I thus refer to the community and Al Mahdi himself interchangeably as the producer of AAC/NIH discourse. When I write, "Al Mahdi argues *x*," I present Al Mahdi as an assemblage of actors who participate in his ongoing construction.

This approach also helps to move consideration of the AAC/NIH beyond Al Mahdi's abuse and exploitation of community members and to decenter him as our primary interest, even while exploring thousands of pages attributed to him. The Ansaru Allah Community's significance is not reducible to Al Mahdi's discourse or crimes; its media represent not a singular "cult leader" but a *community* that has included thousands of members through five decades and counting. Beyond "official" membership, the community's narratives also inform countless readers who have encountered its pamphlets, books, and tapes. Taking these media seriously, I take the community and its extended sphere of conversation partners seriously as well.