

## W.D. Muhammad: The Making of a "Black Muslim" Leader (1933-1961)

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### I

It was an intensely cold afternoon in Chicago on 26 February, 1975, when some 20,000 members of the Nation of Islam, from across the U.S.A., filled Chicago's Amphitheatre to capacity. It was their Saviour's Day, for them the most significant, and one might even say, the holiest day of the year. On this day every year they gathered to celebrate the birthday of Fard Muhammad, whom they considered to be "God-in-Person," the one for whom "praise is due forever." Although Saviour's Day was observed across the U.S.A., its celebration in Chicago had a special significance for members of the "Nation of Islam." For in Chicago the guest of honour used to be none other than Elijah Muhammad himself, the "Messenger of Allah," who addressed his followers with marathon speeches that electrified them. Saviour's Day was always a day of solemn rejoicing and celebration. This year, however, the members of the Nation appeared tense and grim; their faces drawn, darkened with anguish. For only the day before, their leader, Elijah Muhammad, who had led them for over forty years had breathed his last in Chicago's Mercy Hospital after a prolonged struggle against numerous ailments.

The news had left the members of the "Nation of Islam," popularly known as "Black Muslims," baffled, bewildered, speechless. They had immense love and devotion for their leader, believing him to be the Messenger of Allah. They had witnessed many healthy changes in their own lives and in the lives

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of a very large number of fellow Blacks as a result of the teachings of Elijah Muḥammad and of their association with his movement, the Nation of Islam.<sup>1</sup> The wholesome influence of Elijah Muḥammad was evident in their improved economic conditions, the stability of their family life, their enhanced prestige in society, and even in their robust and elegant demeanour. Because of such improvements in their lives, some Blacks had begun to venerate Elijah Muḥammad almost to the point of worshipping him.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there had developed a feeling among many followers of Elijah Muḥammad that he was immortal.<sup>3</sup> This feeling had perhaps received support in the past from the fact that on many an occasion Elijah Muḥammad had, almost miraculously, quickly recovered from very serious illnesses.

The Saviour's Day meeting of 1975 was now devoted to paying tribute to the departed leader and vowing fidelity to his mission. The meeting also had to attend, however, to something more practical and earthly—the choice of Elijah Muḥammad's successor. The news that Wallace D. Muḥammad, Elijah Muḥammad's son, would be the new head of the Nation of Islam came as a surprise to many outsiders who had been following developments in the Nation of Islam. Doubtlessly Wallace D. Muḥammad had once had a very prominent role in the Nation. Around the year 1960 it had appeared likely to Essien-Udom, one of the two most renowned researchers of the movement, that Wallace Muhammad would succeed his father.<sup>4</sup> But since 1963, relations

<sup>1</sup> See Z.I. Ansari, "Aspects of Black Muslim Theology," *Studia Islamica*, Ex fasciculo LIII, (1981), p. 161 and no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Based on personal interviews in 1977 and 1979 in Chicago with many members and leaders of the Nation of Islam, and several persons closely acquainted with and knowledgeable about the Nation of Islam. See also E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism in America: A Search for Identity*, Phoenix Edition, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 79, mentioning the remark of some followers that the Black Muslims "... seem to worship him rather than Allah." Cf. the remark of Malcolm X relating to the period before his break from the Nation of Islam: "... I actually had believed that if Mr. Muhammad was not God, then he surely stood next to God." *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, paperback, (New York, Grove Press, 1966), pp. 305 f.

<sup>3</sup> Based on personal interviews with the members of the Nation of Islam in 1977 and 1979. See also Bruce M. Gans and Walter M. Lowe, "The Islam Connection," *Playboy*, April, 1980, p. 180: "... when Elijah died, thousands of the faithful were shaken because they had believed from the bottom of their hearts that he was immortal." (Cited hereafter as "The Islam Connection.")

<sup>4</sup> See Udom, *op. cit.*, pp. 81 and 268. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 82. However, Eric C. Lincoln, whose book *The Black Muslims in America*, has come to be considered a classic on the subject, did not include Wallace Muhammad in 1961 (when the first edition of his book was published) among the two "leading contenders" to the successorship to Elijah Muḥammad. These two, in his view, were Malcolm X and Raymond Sharrieff. The latter was then, as he had been for long and remained till the death of Elijah Muḥammad, the Supreme Captain of the Nation's para-military wing, the Fruit of Islam. He was also a son-in-law of Elijah Muḥam-



between Wallace and the Nation of Islam were known to be strained. During these twelve years he had been in and out of the movement several times. Some time before Elijah Muhammad's death, however, he had returned to the fold.<sup>5</sup> But were one to go through the files of *Muhammad Speaks*, the official organ of the Nation, for some two years before February, 1975, one would seldom come across Wallace Muhammad's name. It was well known to the leadership of the movement, and also to the rank and file, that Wallace disagreed with the theology of his father. And hence it came as a surprise to many of those present at the Saviour's Day meeting when the National Secretary, Abbas Rassoul, announced that W.D. Muhammad would succeed the "Messenger of Allah" to the headship of the "Nation of Islam."

Since February 1975, W.D. Muhammad has been the leader of the group which, under his father, became a formidable force among the Black Americans. During these nine years, the direction of the movement has changed greatly. Its theology has been reoriented. Its socio-political role has altered. Its emphases have shifted. And, significantly, the group has been re-named twice—first as "The World Community of Al-Islam in the West" and then as "The American Muslim Mission." During these years, a considerable number of members have broken away from the group, although many new persons have joined it. Of those who have left the movement, some have resolutely challenged Wallace D. Muhammad's leadership, especially his claim to be the true inheritor of his father's mission. These include some who wielded great influence in the movement during the days of Elijah Muhammad. The most noted is Louis Farrakhan who has somewhat reduced the following of Wallace Muhammad by his extraordinary demagogic skill.

In order to appreciate the developments which have taken place in the Nation of Islam since 1975, especially the changes introduced into the theology and programme of the movement, it is necessary to have a fair appreciation of the person who has master-minded those changes. With this in mind, we are essaying in the following pages a biographical sketch of W.D. Muhammad. We shall especially attempt to highlight his personality traits, his early life, his personal and family problems, in short, W.D. Muhammad's life experience which should also help us appreciate his later break from his father

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mad, being the husband of his eldest daughter, Ethel. In 1973, when Malcolm X was dead, Lincoln seems to have felt even more strongly that Sharrieff (rather than Wallace) would be the successor. See *ibid.*, 1st edition, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1961), p. 195; and *ibid.*, revised edition, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1973), p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> This took place some time in 1974. See W.D. Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East*, (Chicago, WDM Publishing, 1980). p. 143; C.E. Marsh, "The World Community of Islam in the West," (xerox), Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1977, p. 205, based on information provided by Dr. Naim Akbar, then special aide of Wallace Muhammad; "The Islam Connection," p. 201.

and the Nation of Islam and what he has been trying to do since 1975 when he succeeded his father.

Wallace D. Muḥammad (who has re-named himself Warith Deen Muḥammad) was born on 30 October, 1933, in Detroit, Michigan. He was the seventh of eight children born to Elijah Muḥammad and Clara Muḥammad (six sons; two daughters). Before the birth of Wallace, the founder of the Nation of Islam, one of whose many names was Wallace D. Fard is supposed to have predicted that the child to be born to Elijah and Clara would be a son. He is even supposed to have written the name of the child in chalk in bold letters on the door of the house, and thus to have given the new-born child one of his own names—Wallace.<sup>6</sup> This incident is said to have led the family to believe that Wallace Muḥammad was a child especially consecrated to the mission, and the occasional mention of this to him might well have had a certain impact on Wallace's mind.

In 1934, the year following Wallace's birth, the family moved from Detroit to Chicago where Elijah Muḥammad had established Temple No. 2 of the Nation of Islam. It was in Chicago that Fard Muḥammad was presumably seen for the last time in 1934 before he suddenly disappeared from the scene and the headship of the movement, or to be more accurate, of a big wing of the movement, and leadership was assumed by Elijah Muḥammad.

Wallace Muḥammad spent his childhood and early youth in the Black ghetto of Chicago. He grew up in a society which brazenly discriminated against the Black Americans and made them conscious at every turn that as Blacks they were inherently inferior and were condemned to a life shorn of dignity and promise. Even in the North, which was generally far better than the South, until as recently as the fifties there were places where, according to Wallace Muḥammad, Blacks were afraid to go. Wallace Muḥammad cites the case of Cicero, Illinois, where "less than two decades ago," some White racists decided that they were going to have a party, and hence crucified a "decent, intelligent, good student."<sup>7</sup> The problems of discrimination against, and humiliation of the Blacks were compounded in the 1930's when Wallace Muḥammad was born, when the whole of America was in the grip of the Great Depression which was to leave a trail of ruin and misery across the country. The Depression was ruinous for all Americans, but for the Black Americans it was catastrophic. "During the Great Depression," in the words of Lester

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<sup>6</sup> See W.D. Muḥammad, *Teachings: Secondary Level*, (Chicago, The Honorable Elijah Muḥammad Mosque, 1976), p. xxv. This was mentioned in 1979 to this writer by several long-time members of the Nation, including two brothers of Wallace Muḥammad, viz. Emanuel (now Ayman) Muḥammad and Herbert (now Jabir) Muḥammad.

<sup>7</sup> *The Light Shineth*, p. 205.



Grander, "Negro America almost fell apart."<sup>8</sup> The Blacks were the first to be fired and the last to be hired. In Detroit, for instance, 60 percent of the Negro workers were without work.<sup>9</sup> In Atlanta, Georgia, 65 percent of the Black Americans were on public relief; in Norfolk, Virginia, the figure was 81 percent. No wonder then that hunger stalked the Black ghettos and men and women went about looking "for staple bread, meatless bones, raw potato peelings, or spoiled vegetables from which to make stew or soup, or image of a soup."<sup>10</sup>

Not unlike many other Black Americans, the family of Wallace Muḥammad also had its share of problems. His father, whose income had been a modest one, was laid off in 1929 and remained on relief for two years,<sup>11</sup> and his mother, Clara helped support the family by doing domestic work.<sup>12</sup> What made things particularly bad for the family was that the Nation of Islam, with which Elijah Muḥammad had become associated with conspicuous zeal and devotion, went through a long travail of dissensions and splits. It was because of this power struggle, which occasionally had some ugly manifestations, that Elijah Muḥammad had to leave Detroit and move to Chicago. As we have already mentioned, in Chicago he had established a new temple of the Nation of Islam, and was naturally its head. In this early period, Elijah Muḥammad had to content even in Chicago with formidable rivals. The most notable of these was Abdul Muḥammad. To make things still worse for him, Elijah Muḥammad's own brother, Kalatt Muḥammad, the Supreme Captain of the Fruit of Islam (the para-military wing of the Nation) was also opposed to him and was bent on causing him harm.<sup>13</sup> Given the tradition of violence among the Black Americans especially among Black American sects and cults, it was natural for Elijah Muḥammad to feel seriously threatened. In these perilous circumstances, prudence dictated that Elijah Muḥammad should leave his family in Chicago and keep moving from place to place, more or less in a state of hiding. This period lasted for about eight years—from 1934 to 1942. In 1942, Elijah Muḥammad was sent to prison for his alleged sympathy with the Axis powers and remained imprisoned till 1946. Thus the first thirteen years of Wallace's life were spent without any contact with his father. The

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Lerone Bennett Jr., *Before the Mayflower*, IVth edition, (Chicago, Johnson, 1969), p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> E.F. Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, rev. edition, (New York, Macmillan, 1957), p. 599.

<sup>10</sup> Adeyemi Ademola, "Nation of Islam Deserted." *African Mirror*, August-September, 1979, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Udom, p. 75; Marsh, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> Based on information provided by Ayman Muḥammad, the eldest son of Elijah Muḥammad, to this writer in an interview in September, 1979.

only memory that Wallace carries of meeting his father is a hazy one and took place when he might have been "no more than three or four years old," when he was just a "toddler." His mother took him to a place which he thinks must have been a hotel, not far from their house in Chicago on 34th Street and Charles Street where they then lived. In his own words:

It was a dark kind of a hotel. Looking back at it, it seems that it was a cheap hotel. It was a kind of dark place and she took me into a room and there was my father. . . and she put me on the bed where my father was lying. I was a small boy otherwise she wouldn't have put me on the bed. . . She and my father began to talk and they were talking kind of low. I was trained not to listen. . . I wouldn't listen to anything unless they addressed me. . .<sup>14</sup>

Wallace remembers that his mother fondly mentioned – much to his father's delight – that he (Wallace) also hated the "devils." He also recalls that his father gave him something to eat, either candy or a cookie.<sup>15</sup> During the early years of Wallace's life, the Nation of Islam was still weak, and his elder brothers were not fully grown up and were unable to provide the family with the means of a comfortable living. Wallace Muḥammad lived with his mother, his grandfather, and other brothers and sisters – a large family by all standards – in the ghetto of downtown Chicago in a modest two-storey house. Theirs was a tough life – a life of want and poverty. At times, the family had to be content with the merest of food, even sub-standard food. For occasionally, as Wallace Muḥammad recalls, there was little else besides vegetable and bean soup which his mother would prepare and store, and which she boiled over and over again, and it had to be consumed even when it seemed to have gone somewhat bad for there was simple nothing else.<sup>16</sup> Gradually, Wallace Muḥammad also became conscious, like other Blacks, of the indignity and humiliation to which his people were subjected, the stigma that was attached to their black complexion, and the insults and even physical abuse which they had to endure from time to time.

In view of all this, it is not surprising that the early childhood memories of Wallace D. Muḥammad are not at all pleasant. In reply to a pointed question about his childhood, Wallace told his interviewers that "the only vivid memories he had were painful. He recalled waking up screaming, thinking he was holding a crowbar in his hands to keep invaders from murdering his family."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> and <sup>15</sup> Based on W.D. Muḥammad's interview with this writer in September, 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with this writer in September, 1979. It was presumably owing to economic stringency that fairly early in his childhood W.D. Muḥammad hawked newspapers to earn some money (*Ibid.*).

<sup>17</sup> "The Islam Connection," p. 180.



In this early period of his life, especially during the years 1942 to 1946, not only was Wallace deprived of his father's company but also of the company of his eldest brother, Emanuel, who was also imprisoned along with his father. In addition to his other brothers and sisters, all of whom except one were older than Wallace, the fatherly figure under whose shadow he found comfort and protection was that of his grandfather, Wali Poole (later called Wali Muhammad). Wallace cherished fond memories of him, especially of his warmth and friendliness.<sup>18</sup> Wallace also developed a strong liking for his brother Herbert, who was his elder by just a few years.<sup>19</sup> It would be futile, however, to look for any lasting impression of either of the two on the mental growth or attitudes of Wallace.

The closest and warmest relationship that he had during this period of life was with his mother, Clara Muhammad (d. 1972). It was she who truly shared with Wallace and her other children the long trying years of poverty, misery and insecurity specially from 1934-46 with remarkable patience and courage. Clara Muhammad was a highly devoted and faithful wife, a fine mother, and a very warm, compassionate and generous person. In the absence of his father, and no doubt because of her fine qualities, Wallace Muhammad developed a strong and abiding emotional attachment to her which overshadowed his attachment to everyone else, including his father. In contrast to Wallace's recollections of his father, which usually manifest a blend of positive and negative feelings, his recollections of his mother show unreserved admiration and warmth. When he is questioned about her, Wallace Muhammad gives vent to unreserved veneration and warmth. The following is representative of his feelings:

She always greeted people with a big smile, especially Muslims. She loved the Muslims; she loved the followers of her husband. She was so happy to see that someone was supporting what he (i.e. her husband) was doing and she used to greet him with a big smile. I have seen her just leave the room with tears on her face, and someone would come to the door and then she greeted him with a big smile. She had a big smile on her face. She was a dark woman,

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<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Richard Durham and Herbert (Jabir) Muhammad, Wallace Muhammad said:

"Really, he was like a buddy, he wan't like a grandfather; he was like a buddy to Herbert, to myself. He was (sic. "used") to walk all around with us." (W.D. Muhammad's interview with Richard Durham and Herbert Muhammad, 1977). A transcript of this interview was made available by Herbert Muhammad Foundation, Chicago. Cited hereafter as "Interview with Richard Durham."

<sup>19</sup> Wallace Muhammad spoke of his especially strong liking for two of his five brothers—Herbert and Akbar (his younger brother) in an interview with this writer in September 1979.

a black woman. When she smiled, her teeth... would show up... She just wanted to be hospitable, to help you in every kind of way...<sup>20</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine that the care of her large family single-handedly, and her remarkable kindness to, and compassion for them would have endeared Clara to all her children. In addition, Clara's devotion to her husband saw her play a very important role at this stage of the movement as a major link between Elijah Muhammad (who was for a long time away from the public scene or in prison) and his followers.<sup>21</sup> As Wallace grew to appreciate the Nation of Islam, his admiration for his mother naturally increased owing to the devotion she exhibited for the Nation and her service to its cause. Her influence on Wallace Muhammad, however, was obviously not of an intellectual character. But the emotional attachment he came to have for her did have an influence on the future course of his life as we shall see later, when we examine the causes of his break with his father and the movement.

## II

There are many reasons to assume that from his early childhood, like his other brothers and sisters, Wallace Muhammad's concern centered around the religious cult that his father preached and the movement that he championed. His father's absence from home (1934-46) was a constant reminder of Elijah Muhammad's mission and of the cause he stood for. In the midst of the miserable circumstances of life, and of the indignity to which the family was exposed as Blacks, if there was a solace and a reason for pride, it was their association with Elijah Muhammad who preached a gospel that promised redemption for all Blacks. Above all, the active role of Clara Muhammad in promoting the cause of the Nation of Islam would not have allowed her sons and daughters to forget their father's mission even during the twelve long years of his absence from the family.

Wallace Muhammad's devotion to, and practical involvement with, the Nation of Islam increased when his father was released from prison in 1946 and began to live with his family in Chicago. Elijah Muhammad's homecoming was in all respects a welcome event for the entire family. It filled a major gap in their lives and instilled in them a sense of security and self-assurance. By now, Elijah Muhammad had gathered a reckonable following, which naturally conferred certain prestige on the family. After Elijah Muhammad's return even the material condition of the family improved almost instantly.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with this writer in September 1979.

<sup>21</sup> For the role of Clara Muhammad in the movement at this stage see Raymond Hall, *Black Separatism in the United States*, (Hanover, New Hampshire, University Press of New England, 1978), p. 90.



To quote Wallace Muhammad:

The first day that he came in the menu changed. We had been used to one menu, when he came in he said that he did not want to see any carrots, he said, that he didn't want to see any beets 'cause he had got so many of them in prison. He introduced steak. I had never seen or heard of steak until he came home, and liver, calf liver. We had never had any liver, fried liver, he introduced these things. . . he had a taste for. . . Well we ate better after he came home. He liked to eat well. Even when the money was short, he believed in putting it in food. . . We ate better. . . and we stopped eating certain things like green peas, for a while he cut out green peas. For a while he cut out even green leaf vegetables, he cut these out for a while because he said that they were chemicals. . .<sup>22</sup>

In the following years, the influence and prestige of Elijah Muhammad grew steadily. The Nation's membership rose and its temples increased. The organization prospered financially, and so did its leader and his family. All these developments seem to have further strengthened Wallace Muhammad's conviction in the truth of his father's mission. Moreover, like other Blacks, Wallace Muhammad could see everywhere ugly manifestations of discrimination against his people and their subjection to indignity and humiliation. Nothing could lend greater weight to Elijah Muhammad's gospel: "Whites are devils," than this undeniable fact of American life. This, as Wallace Muhammad grew to youth, the Temple became his "second home," and Fard's Gospel as preached by Elijah Muhammad was "the very air that Wallace. . . breathed."<sup>23</sup> For the Nation of Islam was adept at strengthening the loyalties of its members. Thanks to a host of activities, the Nation absorbed almost the entire leisure time of its members with the result that they were largely cut off from outsiders. For these were either White "devils," or Blacks who had been beguiled and corrupted by the "devils." Whatever else might have been the impact of such a policy, the isolation it produced tended to keep the devotion and enthusiasm of the members at a high pitch.

### III

The Nation of Islam had insisted from the very beginning that the children of its members "should be trained in our schools and not dropped into schools of the enemy where they are taught that whites have been and forever will

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<sup>22</sup> "Interview with Richard Durham," pp. 22-3.

<sup>23</sup> "The Islam Connection," p. 180.

be world rulers.”<sup>24</sup> Consistent with this, Elijah Muhammad’s own children, including Wallace, were educated in the University of Islam. Akbar Muhammad, the youngest, later managed to pursue his studies at al-Azhar, and then continued his studies for Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh. Wallace Muhammad’s formal education, however, was exclusively confined to the University of Islam from where he completed his high school education.<sup>25</sup>

The establishment of this high-sounding institution almost coincided with the inception of the Nation of Islam itself. Its instruction in the initial period, the school-going period of Wallace Muhammad’s life, consisted of tutoring children at home. In Wallace’s own words “it was only when I was maybe nine years old (i.e. circa 1942) that I sat in what I call a class and teaching began in a classroom setting.”<sup>26</sup> Wallace Muhammad completed his 9th grade and then his education was interrupted for several years, for at that time the University of Islam did not provide instruction at high school level. It was only when Akbar Muhammad, five years younger than Wallace, became of the right age for high school that the University of Islam began teaching at the high school level. Wallace then resumed his studies with Akbar and completed his high school which was virtually the terminal point of his formal education.<sup>27</sup>

During school life, Wallace Muhammad came into contact with a host of teachers whom he remembers vividly and with considerable fondness. They were, and some of them still are, associated with his movement. Among his teachers he especially mentions James Shabazz (now called Shaikh Abdulaziz Shabazz), and until recent years an Imam in Kansas City, Sister Viola Kariem, Sister Suzanne X Douglas (who loved English literature and created in Wallace Muhammad an interest in poetry).<sup>28</sup> Of these, Wallace Muhammad thinks he gained the most from Shaikh Shabazz. The standard of formal instruction provided by the school is evident from the fact that Shaikh Shabazz, according to Wallace Muhammad, “couldn’t have been better than a high school graduate, who had done a lot of self-study beyond high school but not formally.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Elijah Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom*, cited by W.A. Marshall, “Education in the Nation of Islam during the Leadership of Elijah Muhammad, 1935-1975,” (xerox), dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education, Loyola University, Chicago, 1976, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> W.D. Muhammad in an interview with this writer in September, 1979.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* After high school the only formal education Wallace received was around 1965-66 when he went to a Junior Loops College in Chicago for a few months. (W.D. Muhammad in an interview with this writer in September, 1979).

<sup>28</sup> The University had a few teachers who were neither Blacks, nor members of the Nation. The job of some of these was to teach Arabic. To them we shall turn later.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



The real significance of the University of Islam was not that it was a good centre of education. It was significant primarily as a potent means of Black Muslim indoctrination, an instrument to develop in the Blacks a sense of identity, to make them shed their sense of inferiority by teaching them that "Blacks are gods and Whites are devils," and thus to bring them up as committed and practising followers of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.<sup>30</sup> The educational institutions of the Nation of Islam effectively moulded the minds of their students because, as we have noted earlier, the Nation managed to keep members of the Nation and also their children largely insulated from external ideas and currents of thought which might have agitated their minds and undermined their loyalties. Like others, the influence of the University of Islam on Wallace Muhammad must have been immense in strengthening his commitment to the doctrines of the Nation during the first twenty-five years or so of his life.

We have mentioned earlier the Nation's conscious policy of keeping his followers within the four walls of the Nation of Islam to the maximum degree. No matter how much Elijah Muhammad might have tried, the insulation could not have been total. One of the steps he took which exposed the pupils of the University of Islam to extraneous intellectual influences was the introduction of Arabic language in the University, a step which required the employment of persons well-versed in Arabic. Also, the lack of trained teachers within the ranks of the Nation called for the employment of some teachers who did not belong to the "Nation of Islam." Wallace Muhammad mentions a few such teachers of whom one or two had a major impact on him.

One of these was a Palestinian called Ibrahim who did not remain in the school for long. He could hardly speak any English. Wallace recalls that while teaching Arabic words, Ibrahim had the habit of rhyming them. He recalls that he taught the class the following words in the following sequence: *jawz*, *lawz*, *mawz*. The next to teach Arabic at the school was a teacher of mixed parentage, being "born of Egyptian and Bilalian (i.e., Black) parents." His name was Kamil but the pupils soon gave him the nickname "Camel." He taught for about one year.<sup>31</sup> The man who had a really serious impact, and who probably sowed the seeds which after over a decade contributed to the sprouting of the ideas which are being expounded by W.D. Muhammad now, was Jamil Diab, a Palestinian immigrant. This is how Wallace Muhammad recalls him:

A very sincere person, very sincere in his faith, a very sincere

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<sup>30</sup> See Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 94. For useful information regarding education in the Nation of Islam, see Marshall, *passim*, especially chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> Wallace Muhammad's interview with this writer in September, 1979.

and firm believer, rational believer in the teachings of the Holy Prophet . . . I had a lot of private conversations with him. He never made me think that he was trying to undermine my father. But in a wise way, a very clever way, what he did was that he tried to show us that . . . the Qur'an is a book that presents the best logic. . .<sup>32</sup>

Jamil Diab had been appointed to teach general science, mathematics and Arabic. Religion would have been too sensitive a subject to be entrusted to anyone outside the Nation. In Wallace Muḥammad's view, Diab did not try to teach religious doctrines such as the "Five Pillars of Islam" since he was conscious that they were at variance with the doctrines taught by Elijah Muḥammad. "Still," says Wallace Muḥammad, "Diab had a way of introducing some religion, though not much, through Arabic."<sup>33</sup> Wallace claims the knowledge of Arabic he received from Jamil Diab, made him "look for new meanings in the Qur'an."<sup>34</sup> This led him later to realise that the teachings of the Qur'an were at variance with those of Elijah Muḥammad.<sup>35</sup> In Wallace's own analysis of what might be termed his gradual conversion to the doctrines of orthodox Islam, the knowledge of Arabic was the basic factor.<sup>36</sup> "I think really," says Wallace, "that was the key to everything."<sup>37</sup>

In addition to his Arabic teachers, Wallace also mentions another teacher of the University of Islam who led him to look critically at the doctrines of the Nation of Islam. This was Louis, who was not a member of the Nation, and taught Physics, and was in fact the best-educated teacher of the University. It is probably the scientific outlook and approach of which Wallace became more sharply aware as a result of the presence of Louis which "kind of took us away from, and made us question a lot of spooky kind of things we had believed before."<sup>38</sup> Wallace sums up by saying:

So I think science, physics as taught in the school, and especially by this teacher Louis (who didn't preach a lot of Elijah Muhammad although he worked with us), and Jamil Diab's influence, and especially the Arabic. Arabic was the key, I think.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> New meanings, that is, different from those taught by his father. "Interview with Richard Durham," p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with this writer in September, 1979.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> "Interview with Richard Durham," p. 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* In addition to these factors, Wallace also emphasized that even though they did not propagate the Qur'anic teachings, both Fard Muḥammad and Elijah Muḥammad directed people towards the Qur'an. What Wallace implies here is that when one began to read the Qur'an, one knew soon enough that the teachings of Fard and Elijah Muḥammad ought to be discarded since they were in opposition to it.



As a boy, and later in his teens, Wallace Muḥammad was interested in a few games and sports – the shuffle-board game, and then boxing (which he practised up to the age of 28). But he did not have much time to devote to his hobbies. Also, Wallace gives the impression that whereas the Nation of Islam were a somewhat light-hearted people in the days of Fard Muḥammad, under his father they became quite dour. Elijah Muḥammad, according to Wallace, was strictly against sports, music and dancing, and even when he sometimes relented towards sports, such interludes were usually quite transient.<sup>40</sup>

One of the interests that he developed in his teens was to compose songs and poems, especially love songs. This interest was generated by Suzanne Doublas, his teacher of literature. In addition to this, however, Wallace also mentions that his interest in composing songs and poems had in fact been prompted by his desire to improve his vocabulary.<sup>41</sup>

As a young man, claims Wallace, he did not have many ambitions since the circumstances were not conducive for their fulfilment. The members of the Nation were overly occupied with obeying, and ever-conscious that they must not break, an elaborate set of rules:

In the early days...the aspirations were to escape the hell-fire... (in) the early days we were constantly occupied by the thought of possibly disobeying the rules, breaking the rules... I don't think that there was any possibility for (sic. read "or") any opportunity for real aspirations to manifest in the early years, because we were so occupied with the thought of obeying...<sup>42</sup>

During the last two years of elementary school and during the high school Wallace began to have the aspiration to become a teacher.<sup>43</sup> The fact that Wallace's formal education stopped at high school presumably was a factor in preventing the fulfilment of this aspiration. He then developed an interest in science, electronics and magnetism, and wanted to become an "electronics technician."<sup>44</sup> But it seems that Elijah Muḥammad wanted his son to remain dependent for his living on him and on the Nation of Islam. According to Gans and Lowe:

The elder Muḥammad expressly forbade Wallace to develop any skill that would enable him to exist on his own. When as a teenager, Wallace wanted to become an electronics technician, Elijah refus-

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> "Interview with Richard Durham," p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> See Udom, p. 82; "Interview with Richard Durham," p. 19; "The Islam Connection," p. 200.

ed to pay his tuition. Wallace was later told that if he tried to get any job outside the Muslim community, the Nation of Islam would guarantee that he came up empty-handed. . . when he was drafted in his 20's, his modest, secular ambition surfaced again. Ordered to do alternative duty at a local state hospital—after applying for conscientious objector status at his father's command—Wallace looked forward to his assignment, because it was a chance to become a lab technician. But Elijah had chosen to spend 16 months in jail for draft evasion and he ordered Wallace to refuse the assignment, sending his son, for all practical purposes, to jail for three years.<sup>45</sup>

In any case, usually there were plenty of jobs in the Nation of Islam's business enterprises. Elijah Muḥammad himself once had a restaurant and a grocery store where, according to Wallace, Elijah Muḥammad himself was the butcher. He also had his children in the business. Wallace recalls that he used to "do everything from slaughtering the chicken to clearing and picking it and then ringed up the money in the cash register."<sup>46</sup> There were times, however, when he was not employed by the Nation of Islam and employment opportunities came up outside the Nation. For instance, long before his break with the Nation in 1964, from September 1952 to March 1954, Wallace worked off and on for the Oxford Electric Company, Chicago as a labourer, earning \$45 a week. But he lost the job because of irregular attendance. He also worked for some time for the Temple-owned restaurant in Chicago.<sup>47</sup> In the Nation itself he held the rank of lieutenant in the Fruit of Islam and, among other things, sold *Muḥammad Speaks*.<sup>48</sup> (After 1964, during his expulsion from the Nation, Wallace supported himself as a house painter, a welder and upholsterer, and at one time worked in a Campbell's soup factory;<sup>49</sup> and even started a bookstore in Chicago,<sup>50</sup> which presumably was not his full-time occupation). Wallace made his living by doing modest jobs, mostly within the Nation of Islam. The confinement of Wallace to jobs available within the Nation of Islam was probably because of Elijah's fear that unless the loaves and fishes of his children were dependent on him, they would cease to be loyal. And Wallace Muḥammad was far too important a lieutenant for Elijah Muḥammad to allow

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<sup>45</sup> "The Islam Connection," p. 200.

<sup>46</sup> *The Light Shineth*, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Udom, p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> Marsh, p. 168.

<sup>49</sup> See Marsh, p. 168; "The Islam Connection," p. 201. A friend who had business dealings with Wallace Muḥammad in connection with his bookstore praised him as a trustworthy person. For Wallace Muḥammad and the bookstore that he established see Marsh, p. 156, who cites Wallace's special aide, Dr. Naim Akbar.

<sup>50</sup> See Marsh, p. 156. This fact is also known to the writer personally.



him to be exposed to the allurements of American society and thereby risk his loyalty.

When Wallace Muḥammad reminisces these events of his life, he occasionally exhibits a sense of disappointment at not having been able to pursue his education beyond high school, or develop the technical skills needed to fulfil his professional aspirations. This, among other things, seems to have bred in him an element of bitterness towards his father.

Given Elijah Muḥammad's strong will-power and his proneness to use all the pressure which he thought necessary, it was obvious that Wallace Muḥammad could not step outside the four walls of the Nation.

But within the Nation, all opportunities that arose were generously made available to him, and the avenues for his rise to eminence were always open. There is ample evidence to show that Elijah Muḥammad was cognisant that Wallace and the youngest son, Akbar, were the two most gifted and promising of all his children. Since Wallace was five years older than Akbar, he naturally had a good share of his father's attention and encouragement insofar as Elijah expected him to play a major role in the leadership of the movement. Around 1960, when Wallace Muḥammad was barely twenty-six years old, it appeared to Essien-Udom that Elijah Muḥammad had picked Wallace to be his successor and was training him for that purpose.<sup>51</sup> If we keep in mind the relationship of Wallace and the leader of the movement along with the former's native intelligence, his relatively good educational background and some of his leadership qualities, it becomes obvious that Wallace had solid bases on which to build his leadership. From an ordinary member, Wallace gradually rose to prominence as a lieutenant in the Fruit of Islam, and in 1958 to Minister of the Nation's Temple of the major metropolitan city of Philadelphia. Wallace Muḥammad was not yet thirty when his influence in the Nation was perhaps second to none except Malcolm X and Raymond Sharrieff, the Supreme Captain of the Fruit of Islam. His knowledge of Arabic and several years education in Qurānic teachings invested him with a high degree of prestige. Around this period Wallace travelled frequently while serving as the representative of his father and the Nation of Islam. He received a large number of inquiries, especially of a doctrinal character.<sup>52</sup>

Wallace Muḥammad's ministry of the Temple of Islam in Philadelphia lasted for about three years (1958-61). For, consistent with the Nation's policy, Wallace declined the call for military service as a conscientious objector. He was instead permitted to take up civilian duties and was asked to report to Elgin

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<sup>51</sup> See Udom, p. 81. That he was the seventh of eight children was also mentioned as significant since the number seven had a mystical significance among members of the Nation (*Loc. cit.*).

<sup>52</sup> See Udom, p. 81, especially the statement of Wallace cited by him. See also n. 59 below.

State Hospital as required under the laws affecting conscientious objectors. Wallace looked forward to this assignment, presumably not only as a suitable solution to the problem, but also as it gave him the chance to become a laboratory technician. But Elijah Muhammad ordered Wallace to refuse the assignment and thus, as mentioned earlier, for all practical purposes ensured the imprisonment of his son, who was sentenced on 21 April, 1960 and sent to the Sandstone Minnesota Correctional Institution on 31 October, 1961 and remained there until he was released on 10 January, 1963.<sup>53</sup>

Notwithstanding occasional grievances, there is no doubt that Wallace Muhammad remained devoted to the Nation of Islam and to its leader up until a little before his break with the Nation in 1964. Whenever the Nation or its leader were subjected to hostile propaganda or damaging allegations, Wallace Muhammad came forward to clarify and defend the Nation's position.<sup>54</sup> In addition to taking part in the routine activities expected of members of the Nation, Wallace Muhammad also took an active interest in policy formulation and laying down important guidelines for the rank and file. Insofar as policy matters are concerned, he seems to have been supportive of encouraging the formation of a broad-based front of the Blacks. This is to be explained by the fact that during this period, identity with the Blacks was the major driving force of the movement. Apart from that, however, an expression of identity with all Blacks and a readiness to close the Black ranks was also a useful posture from a tactical point of view. Such a posture was likely to enhance the appeal of the movement with the Blacks outside the ranks of the Nation of Islam. It is partly this consideration which presumably impelled Wallace to come forth occasionally with a supportive posture towards the N.A.A.C.P.<sup>55</sup> Since the objective of building up a broad-based Black movement was likely to be defeated by bringing religion too much into the limelight, Wallace Muhammad favoured that religion should not be given too much emphasis. He even asked his ministers to tell their audiences that "religion is not important, but we are all the same color."<sup>56</sup> Instead of religion, Wallace preferred to appeal to the Blacks on the basis of "bread and butter." In this connection Wallace revealed in an interview with a prominent minister:

There is something which first doesn't reach the Negro community. You know, our people have had enough spiritualism from Christianity. Our emphasis has been religion, and that won't appeal to them partly because they are ignorant, and partly because

<sup>53</sup> For this episode see Udom, pp. 267-8; Marsh, p. 168; "The Islam Connection," p. 200.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, in 1959 he refuted the allegation of *Time* magazine, denying that Elijah Muhammad preached violence or overthrow of government. See Udom, p. 283.

<sup>55</sup> See Udom, p. 306, n. 13.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 193 and n. 13.



of the discipline of Islam the worldly things they have to forego, smoking, drinking, loose habits, etc. I believe, therefore, that the concrete work of the Messenger should be portrayed. The people are concerned with material things. . . . Our people want to improve their shelter, food and clothing and we should gear our propaganda to that.<sup>57</sup>

While Wallace Muhammad was concerned with raising the prestige of the Nation of Islam, he was also keen to build up the leader of the Nation to the position of the acknowledged leader of all Blacks.

This is evident from a seven-page document which he prepared. We reproduce the fragments cited by Udom, italicizing the parts we deem to be of special significance. The document reads:

"Acquaint the people with the Messenger's Program  
(Not Teach)

- A. Extent of Message
- B. How Messenger Got into the Courier
- C. Muhammad as a Benefactor
- D. Relations with outside groups

Make Welcome Address (state religion not important; but we are all the same color)

. . . *Someone acts excited (State that they are getting envelopes in the back. Encourage them in putting money in the envelopes)*

Mention what the Messenger has done.

Introduction of Speaker to introduce the Messenger (build them up)

Speaker introduces the Messenger

The Messenger

(Note: When the Messenger is shaking hands, the M.C. should say: *We do not want to do anything to disrespect this Great Man. . . . So let us not leave until he leaves.*

A few sisters should speak out spontaneously when the women stand up to accept (the teaching) — such phrases as 'walk on up there sister.' A brother should say, *'We'll die for you sister; nobody will mess with those sisters.'*)<sup>58</sup>

The document shows that Elijah Muhammad was the focus of attention, and significantly he recommended that his position should be further enhanced by means of a set of deliberate acts. Apart from the light that this document

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 193 f.

<sup>58</sup> Excerpt from Wallace Muhammad, "Condensed Outlines" — an outline of propaganda techniques aimed at outside visitors. *Ibid.*, pp. 212 f., and n. 3 on p. 213.

throws on the Nation of Islam in the 1950's, it also throws light on Wallace Muḥammad. It reveals Wallace as a person who was quite conscious of mass psychology. Also, far from being a simpleton, the document indicates Wallace's proneness to quite deliberately manipulate the traits of mass psychology to achieve the objectives of his movement.

By 1961, when Wallace was just twenty-eight years old, he had reached the top echelon of the Nation of Islam, and seemed to be set to rise still higher. After Elijah Muḥammad, the best-known public figure was doubtlessly Malcolm X whose characteristic personality and dynamism were an immense asset for the Nation of Islam. Within the movement, the most powerful man was Raymond Sharrieff, the son-in-law of Elijah Muḥammad (being the husband of the latter's daughter, Ethel), who was the Supreme Captain of the Fruit of Islam. The third man in rank of importance was undoubtedly Wallace Muḥammad. But in a sense, there was greater promise for his rise than the other two. For Wallace Muḥammad had two advantages. He was a son of the "Messenger of Allah," and thus was invested with an inherent holiness that no one else could claim. Secondly, Wallace had an edge over both other men since he had had a relatively better education. It seems that Wallace Muḥammad was considered better than either of them in his understanding of doctrinal matters.<sup>59</sup> The appointment of Wallace Muḥammad as Minister of the Nation's Temple in Philadelphia, and his various assignments to represent Elijah Muḥammad were seen as steps to prepare him for an important role in the Nation of Islam.

Be that as it may, Wallace Muḥammad's imprisonment from October 1961 to January 1963, proved a turning point in his life. After his release, things were no longer the same. Had he changed during his imprisonment? Or did the Nation's leadership, (including his father), change its attitude towards Wallace? Be that as it may, the fact remains that 1963 saw him involved in serious differences with the Nation of Islam leadership and in 1964 he broke away from the movement and its leader. The period of his internment and the years following his release in 1963, leading to his return to the fold of the Nation of Islam in 1974 and his accession to its leadership in 1975, call for a separate study and forms the subject of a separate paper.

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<sup>59</sup> For an example of Malcolm X approaching Wallace Muḥammad for the solution of a doctrinal problem see *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, op. cit., pp. 297 f.