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**Before the Fez:  
The Life and Times of Drew Ali, 1886-1924**

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**I. Finding Ali**

A scrutiny of black American Islamic literature reveals that while there is a proliferation of texts on religious communities like the Nation of Islam, Five Percenters, Ahmadiyya and Sunnis, there is a paucity of accounts on the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), an Asiatic Moslem religious movement founded in mid 1920s Chicago for African-Americans. According to Edward Curtis IV, academics' relative silence on MSTA's early religious history and its prophet Noble Drew Ali (1886-1929) has been attributed to a dearth of primary source literature external to the movement as well as the permeation of hagiographic Moorish myths

sculptured by different groups.<sup>1</sup> MSTA religious texts like the *Circle Seven Koran*, *Koran Questions for Moorish Americans* and the *Moorish Guide (1928-1929)* only serves to document the movement's sanitized history from its official inception in 1925 onwards but divulges vague silhouettes of Ali's pre 1925 origins with the exception of scant allusions to his birth details and roots of his proto-MSTA religious establishment, the Canaanite Temple in Newark, New Jersey. Essentially, this manuscript takes up Curtis' challenge to probe against the grain of romanticized Moorish myths and empirically reconstruct Ali's beginnings prior to donning the Moorish American fez of Prophethood in 1925 through an examination of fortuitously surfaced documents such as Ali's World War I draft card, census records and street directories.

Stripping Ali from layers of cosmetically embellished folklore has resulted in the emergence of Thomas Drew, a gutsy African-American who constantly reinvented himself from a struggling agricultural and port laborer in Norfolk and Richmond, Virginia into Professor Drew, an Oriental Scientist before his final metamorphosis into Noble Drew Ali, an Asiatic Moslem Prophet in Newark, New Jersey. In the midst of Drew's evolution between 1886 and 1924, Thomas Drew reported to Local Board No. 7 in a public school in Bruce Street, Newark, New Jersey on Sep 12, 1918 for the Third Draft registration for men aged between eighteen and forty-five as part of the volunteer-conscripted American army to combat German troops in the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America*, Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2002), 47; Edward E. Curtis IV (ed), "Debating the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple: Toward a New Cultural History", in *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, ed. Curtis and Danielle Brune Sigler (Indiana University Press, 2009), 78-79.

Great War.<sup>2</sup> The illiterate, medium-built Virginian migrant struggled to complete his draft registration card, a most vital document to unveil Ali's enigmatic past.

The image shows two pages of a WWI Draft Registration Card for Thomas Drew. The left page is the 'REGISTRATION CARD' and the right page is the 'REGISTRAR'S REPORT'.

**REGISTRATION CARD**

Serial Number: 2967, Order Number: A0123

Name: Thomas Drew

Permanent Home Address: 181 Warren (City or town) (County) (State)

Age in Years: 32, Date of Birth: Jan 8 1886

RACE: White, Negro, Oriental, Indian, Chinese, Japanese

U. S. CITIZEN: Native Born, Naturalized, Citizen by Father's Naturalization, Alien

PRESENT OCCUPATION: Laborer, EMPLOYER'S NAME: Submarine Boat Corp.

PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS: Port Newark N.J.

NEAREST RELATIVE: Ambrose Drew (uncle), Norfolk, Va.

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE

P. M. G. O. Form No. 1 (Rev. 1918)

**REGISTRAR'S REPORT**

29-2-19-G

DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRANT

HEIGHT			BUILD			COLOR OF EYES	COLOR OF HAIR
Tall	Medium	Short	Slender	Medium	Stout		
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Black	Black

29 Has person lost arm, leg, hand, eye, or is he obviously physically disqualified? (Specify):

Muscles in forearm badly burned

30 I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read or had read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature or mark, and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:

P. B. W. Rogers (Signature)

Date of Registration: SEP 12 1918

Local Board No. 7 for the City of Newark, N. J. Bruce Street (STAMP OF LOCAL BOARD)

Fig 1: Thomas Drew, 181 Warren St., Newark, N.J, born Jan 8, 1886, WWI Draft Registration Card, Sep 12, 1918. From Ancestry.com

Three details in the draft card verified that Thomas Drew was the same person as Noble Drew Ali even though the former's first name "Thomas" and Virginian roots challenged the commonly accepted belief that Ali was born Timothy Drew in North Carolina. First, Thomas Drew's *address listing* as 181 Warren Street, Newark, New Jersey dovetailed with the residence cited in Professor Drew, the Egyptian Adept's advertising brochure (See Figure 2). Second, Thomas Drew's *birthdate* of Jan 8, 1886 coincided with Ali's birthdate cited in the movement's

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Drew, *World War I Draft Registration Card*, Serial No: 2967, Order No: A0123, Sep 12, 1918. Accessed Ancestry.com on Aug 15, 2013.

religious literature *Koran Questions* and his death certificate.<sup>3</sup> Third, Thomas Drew's claim that his nearest relative was "Uncle Ambro Drew" residing in Norfolk, Virginia<sup>4</sup> unearthed other fragments of Ali's shrouded past.

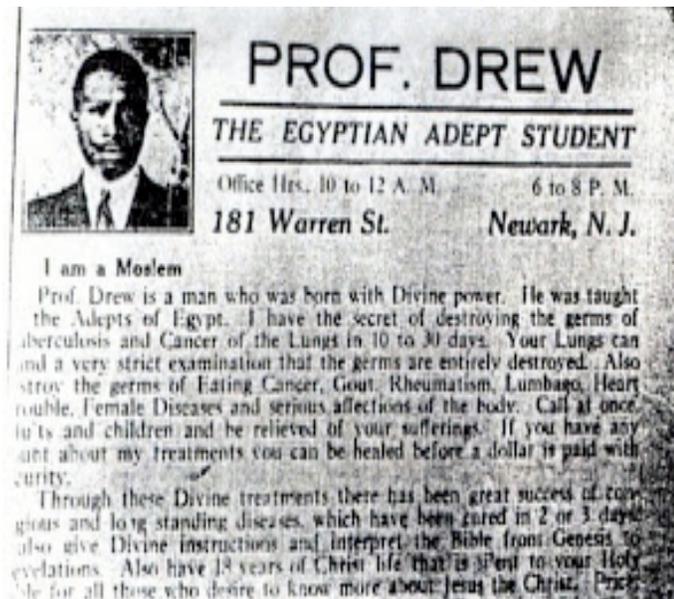


Fig 2: Professor Drew: The Egyptian Adept Student

Combing through public records of Thomas Drew's Virginian parentage led to further discoveries including a 1920 US Federal Census record of Drew residing in 181 Warren Street, Newark, N.J, working as "preacher" on the "public streets".<sup>5</sup> Another was the 1900 US Federal

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<sup>3</sup> Noble Drew Ali, *Koran Questions for Moorish Americans* (Chicago, undated). Question No. 11; Timothy Drew, "Standard Certificate of Death, State of Illinois Registered No. 22054, Jul 25, 1929 originally from Sheik Way El, *Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple of America: The Movement that Started it All* (lulu.com, 2013), 112.

<sup>4</sup> Though Virginia represented a departure from the cities of North Carolina, Newark and Illinois academics traditionally examined, I was undeterred by this anomaly for two reasons. First, Ali boasted of at least 3 temples in Virginia during the 1<sup>st</sup> Moorish National Convention in 1928 suggesting significant influence there. Second, Thomas' nearest relative was an "uncle" rather than members of his nuclear family corresponded to MSTA legends of a young Ali raised by his aunt.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Drew, *Fourteenth Census of the United States 1920 Population*, line 35, State of New Jersey, Essex County, Newark Township, Supervisor's District No.8, Enumeration District No. 161,

Census Record revealing Drew's past as an African-American "farmhand" in Norfolk, Virginia who was "adopted" neatly paralleling Moorish folklore about a young Ali abandoned by his biological parents.<sup>6</sup> While devout MSTA followers would expectedly be wary of embracing Drew Ali's de-mythologized past as Thomas Drew, it would simultaneously be empirically be irrational for them to dismiss the symbiotic convergence between the pair as both shared a common surname, racial group, birth date, literacy levels, street address and religious occupation.

Unveiling Ali's identity signifies a *historiographical breakthrough* for researchers since these discoveries yielded verifiable truths including his actual birth name, origins, physical description, literacy levels, adopted family structure, emigration patterns, employment records and early religious experimentation. Secondly, understanding Ali's pre-1925 past acts as a useful *historical tool to explain his evangelical success* ahead of other proselytizing religious movements in 1920s black urban America. While Ali played an Eastern personae as Allah's Asiatic Prophet, Drew's distinctive African-American roots and common struggles blessed him with a unique insight into the psyche and spiritual pulse of urban African-Americans in the competitive religious marketplace. Third, Thomas Drew's successful triumph over family crises, illiteracy, racial discrimination and class barriers posed by urbanization, emigration, warfare and shifting religious philosophies in early twentieth century America serves as a powerful and relevant repository of *historical consciousness* for contemporary black American Muslim

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Seventh Ward of City, Sheet No: 5A, enumerated on Jan 6, 1920. Accessed Ancestry.com on Aug 25, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Drew, *Twelfth Census of the United States* Schedule No. 1 Population, line 18, State of Virginia, Norfolk County, Supervisor's District No. 2, Enumeration District No. 105, Fourth Ward of City, Sheet No, 23, enumerated on Jun 21, 1900. Accessed Ancestry.com on Aug 25, 2013.

communities to retrospectively tap into and adopt as an inspirational blueprint to forge a positively distinctive black, Islamic and American identity for the present and future.

It is imperative to highlight that juxtapositioning the empirical Ali vis-à-vis the mythical Ali does not nullify the psychic emotional truths embraced by Moorish Americans nor does it render the mythmaking process a futile one. By understanding Moorish myths neither as an impotent falsehood or sacrosanct profound truths but rather as a social product of fashioning a group's cultural identity in relation to Ali, these myths remain important windows of insights into the collective minds of the mythmakers and the reasons for their creation, form of appearance and appeal.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, Drew himself was the first Moorish mythmaker by promoting an inflated, grandiose caricature of himself to edge above other Oriental Scientists in 1920s Newark, New Jersey and Chicago, Illinois. State authorities however have deconstructed Ali's portrait as a façade, advancing through sensationalist newspaper exposé headlines a stereotypical image of Ali as a sexually deviant charlatan before Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) agents in the 1940s remolded Ali as a seditious, pro-Japanese menace rather than a messiah. Ali's devoted religious community countered the state's demonization of their saint by churning a myriad of glorified memoirs that mushroomed in the 1980s in commemoration of the MSTA founder's centennial birth anniversary in 1986. Even authorities like the Newark City Municipal Council rode on the

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert Berg, "Mythmaking in the African American Muslim Context: The Moorish Science Temple of America, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims", *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, September 2005, Vol. 73, No. 3, 685-703.

resurgence of Ali's sanitized appeal, commending his "instrumental leadership" revealing selective amnesia of their prior persecution.<sup>8</sup>

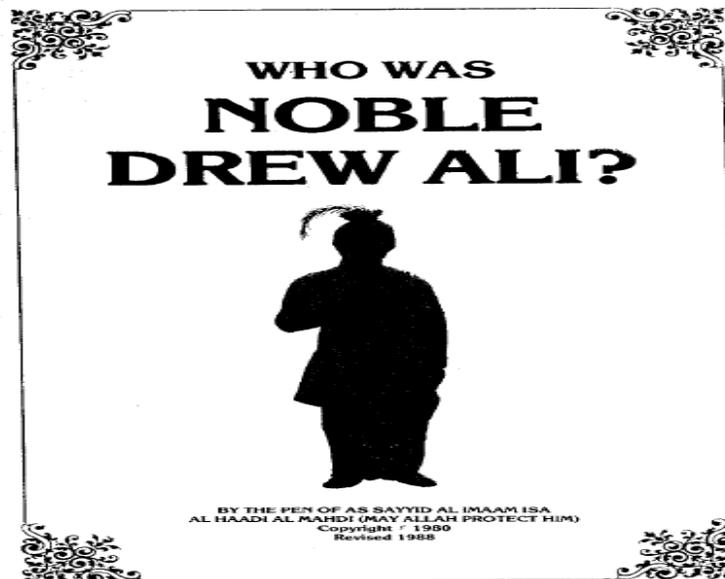


Fig 3: Isa Muhammad, *Who was Noble Drew Ali?*  
(Original Tents of Kedar, Brooklyn, New York, 1988)

Ostensibly, such posthumous accounts were necessary to preserve their Prophet's legacy considering the movement's alarming loss of members, temples and prominence as compared vis-à-vis to other black Islamic religious movements like the Nation of Islam, Five Percenters and Sunni Islam.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the spatial domain of Ali's myths also served as contentious spaces for different Moorish factions to exert their legitimacy as the rightful guardian of the Prophet's past and legacy over other rival sects' narratives. The protean nature of myths even attracted rival external black Islamic leaders like Isa Muhammad whose text *Who was Noble*

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<sup>8</sup>Sandra Weaver-Bey, "Noble Drew Ali: A Centennial Remembrance 1886-1986", (Hartford, Connecticut, 1985), *MSTA Collection Schomburg Archives*.

<sup>9</sup>Tasneem Paghdwala, "Aging of the Moors", *Chicago Reader*, Vol. 37, No. 8, Nov 15, 2007.

*Drew (1988)* manipulated Ali's myths to try siphon Ali's followers into his Ansarullah Community through an invented linear trajectory of black Islamic religious figures from Ali to Elijah Muhammad to himself in an unbroken-but-surreptitious chain of succession.

The competing mythological narratives where Ali's past were used and abused engendered an extremely haphazard biographical past. Though these pluralistic accounts frequently contradicted one another, they could generally be categorized into (i) an exotic genealogical lineage from 1886 to 1895 (ii) dubious employment history from 1895 to 1900 (iii) debatable travels and spiritual odyssey from 1900 to 1913 and (iv) an unverifiable Canaanite Temple leadership in Newark, New Jersey from 1913 to 1925.

## II. Genealogy Myths

Every year on the 8<sup>th</sup> January, thousands of Moorish-Americans throughout various temples commemorate Noble Drew Ali's birthday as encouraged by the Prophet himself, "*Celebrate my birthday January 8<sup>th</sup>, invite your Asiatic friends to come out and enjoy it with you. Yes, bring out your baskets of food to the Temple and banquet them*".<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically in the midst of pious revelry, the faithful has remained obscure about concrete details of their founder's birth. The blurring of lines between fact and fantasy was enhanced further as several leaders romanticized the event as a divinely cosmological one, advocating that on Ali's birthday an earthquake took place symbolizing the arrival of Allah's Prophet on Earth.<sup>11</sup> In likelihood, Ali himself encouraged such legends as recounted by Brother I. Cook Bey, Ali's close aide, that an

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<sup>10</sup> J. Blakeley-Bey, "Supreme Grand Advisor's Plea to the Grand Body in 1964", MSTA Schomburg Collection

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad, *Who was Drew Ali?*, 4.

eclipse took place in the rural community where the prophet was born, “*When I was born, it turned black dark in the day time. The people put their hoes down and came out into the fields*”.<sup>12</sup> While these glorious accounts of Ali’s miraculous birth was designed to authenticate his religious leadership, contemporary Moorish Americans continues to cling on to such mythological narratives of Ali’s unproven genealogy, parentage and upbringing in North Carolina.

However, the newly discovered materials attesting that Ali was born Thomas Drew on Jan 8, 1886 in Virginia, United States before he was adopted went against the grain of Moorish dogmatic beliefs regarding his first name, parentage, racial genealogy and birthplace. Ali’s deliberate masquerading of his origins with an Eastern mask was not the work of a con artist but rather that of a skillful proselytizer who (a) adroitly crafted an Oriental image comprehensible and alluring to his audience, (b) deftly blanketed his lineage out of MSTA literature and re-aligned it to a more divine genealogical heritage, (c) selected delicate shards of his painful past and weaved them into transmogrified Prophet-like tropes and (d) ingeniously connected his broken familial past with his present demands as a Prophet by extracting relevant chapters of Oriental literature and weaving them in his Moorish sacred text.

Ali’s first name, “Thomas” was never reflected in Moorish literature that simply listed their Prophet as Noble Drew Ali. Hence, nobody within the community was actually aware of Ali’s first name. The first member to utilize the name “Timothy Drew” was Aaron Payne El

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<sup>12</sup> Way El, *Noble Drew Ali*, 232. Brother I. Cook Bey did not specify the exact name of the rural community but merits closer attention by academics because he was very close to Ali from 1925 and moved into the same apartment with the Prophet in South State Street, Chicago.

when filing Ali's death certificate on Jul 25, 1929.<sup>13</sup> While it could be argued that Payne was privy to Ali's earlier identity as a close aide, Payne El's fealty to Ali should not be overplayed as his rise in the Moorish ranks as Supreme Business Manager was belated in Feb 1929 and he quickly exited the movement for a political career.<sup>14</sup> In likelihood, Payne depended on newspaper articles written by investigative journalists who portrayed Ali as a doppelgänger who mutated his first names Timothy Drew, Eli Drew and John Drew.<sup>15</sup>

The truth was that Ali was born Thomas Drew and consistently used his birth name on official documents as late as 1920 before disguising his true identity because he was a Moorish Asiatic Great Gatsby who suppressed his impoverished origins with a more ostentatious Eastern personae to inflate his aura of religious grandeur in an appealing, comprehensible fashion to a black audience who associated Drew's symbolic connections to Egypt and Morocco with their own yearning for affluent abundance and spiritual truth in 1920s America.<sup>16</sup> While Ali masked his first name, he also consciously retained his surname Drew through his various identity variations suggesting a desire to retain slivers of his past. This calculated gesture to anchor his Eastern identity to a distinctively American heritage enhanced the effectiveness of his Moorish evangelical crusades as the unique Eastern-American formula reassured potential converts interested in embracing a new Moorish, Moslem identity that a conversion did not entail a complete severing of cords to their family and American roots.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>14</sup> "Brother Greene Bey Quits Business Manager Post", *Moorish Guide*, , MSTA Collection

<sup>15</sup> "Murder Exposes Moorish Leader's Love Affairs", *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, Va.), Mar 30, 1929, 6; "Six Held to Grand Jury for Cult Battle Murders", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sep 28, 1929, 4; "Chicago Cultists on Trial for Office Murder", *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb 15, 1930, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream 1790-1935*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1-2.

Table 1: Evolution of Thomas Drew, 1886-1925

No	Name	Year	Occupation	Address	Household Members
1	Thomas Drew	1886	-	-	-
2	Thomas Drew	1898	Laborer	279 Princess Anne Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia	James Washington Drew Lucy Drew
3	Thomas Drew	1900	Farmhand	411 Princess Anne Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia	James Washington Drew Lucy Drew Addie V Drew Brinnie Drew
4	Thomas Unknown	1910	Longshoreman	205 Nicholson St., Norfolk, Virginia	Joshua Whiting
5	Eli Drew	1916	Porter	1422 Moore, Richmond, Virginia	Edward Gus Sulley
6	Thomas Drew	1917	Laborer in Port Newark		

7	Thomas Drew	1918	WWI Draft Registrant	181 Warren Street, Newark, New Jersey	Louise Atkins Gaines
8	Professor Drew	1918-1923	The Egyptian Adept		
9	Prophet Noble Drew Ali	1925-1929	Moorish American Prophet	Chicago, Illinois	-

Fascinatingly, Drew’s historical records corroborated the myths concerning Ali’s parentage and adoption. Ali’s standard childhood narratives posited that he was adopted by an abusive aunt after his biological father mysteriously disappeared and his mother passed away. This perfectly blended with the 1900 Census where Thomas was adopted and raised by an African-American couple, James Washington Drew (born Oct 1860) and Lucy Drew (born May 1863) in Norfolk, Virginia as early as 1898 when Ali was twelve years old.<sup>17</sup> Thomas’ relationship to the head of the household was listed as “Adpt Son” as his adoptive parents took

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<sup>17</sup>1898 *Directory of Norfolk, Va.* ( J. L. Hill Printing Co., Va., 1898), 180. Accessed Ancestry.com on 15 Aug, 2013.

him into their residence in 411 Princess Anne Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Lucy Drew was listed as having eight children of whom only two were living- referring to her biological daughters- Aadie Drew (born Jan 1898) and Brinnie Drew (born Sep 1899) - but the adopted Thomas was not included in this statistical classification. The Drews' adoption of Ali was most likely dictated by financial considerations to supplement their meagre family income constituting of James' salary as a common laborer and Lucy's wages as a laundress.<sup>19</sup>

411	323	463	Drew, James	Head	B	M	Oct	1860	39	M	20		
		463	Lucy	Wife	B	F	May	1863	34	M	20	8	2
			Aadie	Daughter	B	F	Jan	1898	2				
			Brinnie	Daughter	B	F	Sept	1899	12				
			Thomas	Adopted Son	B	M	Jan	1886	14				

Fig 4: Thomas Drew, “Adpt Son”, Jan 1886, Ancestry.com

This empirical discovery of Ali's adoption explains the curious silence on Ali's biological lineage in the Moorish religious texts simply because Drew knew very little of his biological parents. For inquisitive followers who questioned him on his genealogy, Ali deflected their requests by instead offering an apocryphal explanation, *“I didn't tell anyone where I was I born or who my parents were, because I didn't want people to make a shrine out of the place or make over my parents like what was done with Joseph and Mary”*.<sup>20</sup> Ali's response illustrated his proselytizing genius in blanketing his past while simultaneously advancing his cause as a divine prophet by associating his biological parents with revered Biblical figures Joseph and Mary. Convinced of Ali's divine lineage, even top MSTA officials remained unaware of his true

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Drew, Lucy Drew, *1900 Census*.

<sup>19</sup> James W. Drew, Lucy Drew, *1900 Census*.

<sup>20</sup> Way El, 222.

lineage. In completing Ali's death certificate, Aaron Payne simply scrawled "unknown" in sections requesting Ali's parents' names and birthplaces. In 1942, Charles Kirkman-Bey, Ali's linguistic translator, could not respond to FBI agents' interrogation on Ali's parentage, "*If Noble Drew Ali was born in North Carolina and you travel all over the United States, did you ever check birth records to determine who his parents were?*"<sup>21</sup>

Still the new discovery on Ali's adoption fall short in disclosing Ali's past before his adoption and the definitive reasons for his adoption. Moorish folklore traditionally rationalized Ali's tragedy of losing both parents at an early age as a prophesized mandate of his divine future. Based on the mythical narrative, after adoption, Ali experienced a traumatic childhood at the hands of his abusive adoptive auntie who hurled him into a blazing fire burnt marks on his body. This episode concluded miraculously when "*Allah, the never sleeping watchman saved him*" as another ominous sign of his power and destiny to lead his people.<sup>22</sup> Isa Muhammad's Sunni-centric exaggerated exegesis of this Moorish legend deified Ali further as a modern-day equivalent of the Quranic and Biblical Prophet Abraham in his escape from a similar situation, "*Allah's Most Glorified and Exalted in His unrelenting mercy saved the child (Ali) from the burning furnace and from that point on prepared him for the great work that he was to perform for his people...Remember the story of Nimrod casting Abraham PBUH into the fire for 7 days and how Allah most glorified and exalted sent His heavenly hosts Al Malaa 'ikah to protect Abraham PBUH from this.*"<sup>23</sup> Though the new empirical findings fail to ascertain the authenticity of his aunt's heinous acts, they provide a key insight in Ali's proselytizing ability. A

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<sup>21</sup> Interview of Charles Kirkman-Bey by Durward W. Harrell, Frank Zeiter and Detective Murray Young, Nov 25, 1942, *FBI HQ Files on MSTA*.

<sup>22</sup> Eunice El, "Ali", 1.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad, *Drew Ali?*, 4.

corroboration of Ali's mythical fiery episode with Thomas Drew's 1918 WWI Draft Card describing Ali's forearm as "badly burnt" revealed Ali's genius in selectively utilizing scars from his past as relevant material to be woven into his sermons that mesmerized his audience into believing his divine origins as a child by showing his burnt marks.<sup>24</sup>

In the absence of Drew's biological parental ancestry, MSTA followers posthumously sought to fill the gap by constructing mythical racial bloodlines revolving Ali's Cherokee racial heritage. The most common trope featured Ali as a mixed biological offspring of his father, a Moor from Northwest Africa and his mother of Cherokee descent while watered down versions simply postulated that Drew was born near a Cherokee reservation and raised as an adopted Cherokee. Though Thomas Drew distinctively identified himself racially as an African-American in the 1900, 1910 and 1920 Census and 1918 Draft Card as opposed to possessing Native American heritage, it was still possible that Drew possessed mixed Native American heritage given that African blood was the main racial identifier in past government records. Sister Eunice El first hinted at the Prophet's Cherokee roots in a 1956 *Moorish Review* article, "Our Prophet came out of the Cherokee Tribe. The only tribe that produce nobles" clearly establishing a mythical link between Ali and noble lineage.<sup>25</sup> To verify Moorish claims, future chroniclers such as Muhammad Abdullah Al Ahari pointed to posed photographs where Ali ornamented his fez with a feather though his logic was flawed because donning a feather did not necessary imply Ali's Cherokee roots.<sup>26</sup> Whether real or imagined, Ali's claims to Cherokee heritage would have greatly increased his stature among many African-American followers due

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Drew, 1918 WWI Draft Registration Card

<sup>25</sup> Eunice El, "Prophet Noble Drew Ali", *Moorish Review* 1956, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Abdullah Al Ahari, *Pyramids, Slave Cabins and Crescents in the Sky: The Paths of Transmission for American Islamic Nationalism*, (Magribine Press, Chicago, 2012), 192.

to the significant respect African-Americans accorded to Native Americans for their resistance to white American colonialism as well as a shared subaltern past where Native Americans sheltered enslaved and escaped African-Americans. After the 1970s, the future implications of Ali's ambiguous racial lineage was to inject a democratizing (and fissiparous) element in Moorish membership enabling avant-garde white Anglo-Saxon Americans like Hugo P. Learning Bey to claim a complex white, Moorish, Native Indian identity. Later in the 1990s, this trend led to the formation of black neo-Moorish Native American communities such as the Nuwabian Moors founded by Isa Muhammad.<sup>27</sup>

Drew's excising of his roots within his public mask did not represent a total divorce from his past. Drew's bitter past in Norfolk, Virginia continued to greatly influence his future directions as a Moorish Science Prophet. Having personally observed his adoptive family unit develop only to disintegrate when his adoptive parents severed marital ties and J.W. Drew remarried Charity Drew, another wife in 1904 with whom he fathered three more children by 1910, Ali accentuated the importance of family relationships and social obligations by incorporating relevant passages from *Unto Thee I Grant* such as "Marriage Instructions for Man and Wife", "Duty of a Husband", "Holy Instructions for Thy Children" into the *Circle Seven Koran*.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the *Circle Seven Koran* was not a plagiarized text but a highly conscious, sensitive decision to ensure that families in his religious community avoided a similar fate.

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<sup>27</sup> Nathaniel Deutsch, *Inventing America's Worst Family: Eugenics, Islam and the Fall and Rise of the Tribe of Ishmael*, (University of California Press, California, 2009), 170-171.

<sup>28</sup> J. W. Drew, line 13, 132 Newton Rd, Norfolk County, Virginia, Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910 Population, Ward No. 4, Supervisor's District No: 2, Enumeration District No. 39, enumerated on Apr 14, 1910. Accessed Ancestry.com Oct 12, 2013. *Unto Thee I Grant* was a Rosicrucian text first published in 1925 that Ali was influenced by and incorporated into his own *Koran*. Noble Drew Ali. *Circle Seven Koran* (undated, unpublished)

Cruelly, Ali's own family failed to reach the lofty utopian heights he envisioned as his first wife Pearl Drew Ali rebelled against Ali's leadership in early 1929 and he subsequently entered a controversial short-lived marriage with Mary Drew Ali, a fourteen year old daughter of his trusted lieutenant Brother G. Foreman Bey.<sup>29</sup>

### III. Work Myths

While Ali was silent on his occupational past, devotees and authorities hypothesized that Drew was a nomadic gypsy, an entertainer in magic-circus circles and an international itinerant merchant. These suggestions however have been discredited as various records emphatically revealed that the un-fezzed Drew was employed in occupations traditionally reserved for illiterate African-Americans. Between 1898 and 1918, Thomas Drew worked as a laborer, rural farmhand, longshoreman, porter and maritime laborer.

The chasm between Ali's imagined and actual employment past is nevertheless useful in understanding the success of Ali's evangelical strategies. First, his employment history in such occupations associated with black urban America furnished him the strategic advantage of understanding the psyche of future MSTA converts most of whom came from similar socio-economic underclass with problems Ali could diagnose and remedy. Second, Ali's silence on his traditional African-American employment past was a pragmatic and deft tactic in his presentation to potential converts by de-Negrofying himself in line with his new Eastern,

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Drew Ali, line 43, 3619 Indiana Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, Fifteenth Census of the United States 1930 Population Schedule, Second Ward of City, Block No. 106, Enumeration District No. 16-62, Supervisor's District No. 8, enumerated on Apr 14, 1930. Accessed Ancestry.com Dec 28, 2013. Brother Foreman Bey was appointed on Ali's Board of Sheiks in 1927.

Moorish persona. Third, Ali's oscillatory shifts in declaring fealty to the state and departing from early seditious impulses facilitated the survival and rise of the MSTA.

A prevalent myth on the teenaged Ali was that he joined a travelling gypsy troupe before he was forced to leave following false accusations of stealing a book. In a reversal of fortunes, an elder gypsy absolved Ali from the charges and convinced Ali's accusers to spare him. However Ali still abandoned the group after a mysterious voice repeatedly urged Ali "*if you go, I will follow!*" to leave the entertainment industry and embark a quest towards Prophethood.<sup>30</sup> While this was unlikely to have taken place, the event should be contextualized as Ali receiving the calling to ministry akin to Malcolm X's miraculous vision of a white apparition who visited him in prison.

Another oral tradition in Moorish circles was that a young Ali was employed as a professional circus magician whose superhuman feats in the early 1900s entertained vaudeville audiences throughout America.<sup>31</sup> This legend gained credibility in academic writings after Ali's advertising pamphlet called the *Great Moorish Drama* emerged in Peter Lamborn Wilson's *Sacred Drift* where Ali urged African-Americans to witness acts including an escape from several yards of rope reminiscent of Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem.<sup>32</sup> Authorities investigating Ali in 1929 might have obtained a copy of the Moorish Drama brochure when they alluded to Ali's previous connections with a circus group, "*In 1915, he was accompanying a*

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<sup>30</sup> Eunice El, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Allah Jihad, *Immortal Birth*, (UBUS Communications Systems, 2007) , 36.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Sacred Drift: Essays on the Margins of Islam*, (City Light Books, San Francisco, 1993), 29. Note that nowhere in the biblical text was Jesus reported to have escaped from ropes and Ali's 1927 advertising act most probably referred to the apocryphal Jesus in Levi Dowling's *The Aquarian Gospels* (1908) who escaped crucifixion in Jerusalem before embarking on a spiritual journey to various countries.

*Hindu fakir in circus shows when he decided to start a little order of his own. The first temple was set up in Norfolk*’.<sup>33</sup> The veracity of both these myths however is shrouded in doubt when referenced to Thomas Drew’s employment records.

While the myth on Drew’s gypsy lifestyle probably originated from his itinerant lifestyle shuffling between Norfolk, Richmond, Virginia, Newark, New Jersey and Chicago, Illinois, the other urban legend emphasizing Ali’s circus connection rooted from authorities’ conjecture that Ali belonged to a group of Egyptian fakirs named Beys, whose combination of magic and missionary work in 1920s New Jersey coincided with Ali’s own rise as religious leader.<sup>34</sup> Though the Beys proselytized for the Egyptian Coptic faith, they brought in audiences not for their spiritual message but their amazing feats. The Egyptian Beys bewildered Western audiences in Selwyn Theatre in Broadway, Loew’s State Theatre and Keith’s Theatre, New Jersey with acts like being buried alive under cataleptic conditions, trance, hypnotism, mind-reading, manipulating their wrists’ pulse rates and suspending their bodies in mid-air balanced between swords. One of them, Hamid Bey, who earned the wrath of Harry Houdini in 1926 for being an Eastern hoax with superfluous claims of esoteric superpowers, headlined vaudeville acts and was dubbed the “Egyptian Adept”, an appellation shared with Professor Drew in Newark<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Murder Exposes”, 6. Note also that the newspaper report pointed to Ali’s beginnings in Norfolk, Virginia paralleling discoveries of Thomas Drew’s residence.

<sup>34</sup> G.B. Seybold, “Sanctified Magic”, *Popular Science Monthly*, Sep 1926, 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> “Hamid Bey Dies on Stage of Empire: Egyptian Adept Gives Amazing Demonstration of Cataleptic Trance”, *San Antonio Light*, Apr 3, 1927, 47; “Fakir Buried Hours, Beats Houdini Time: Hamid Bey Lies in Grave Nearly Three Hours to Explode the Shallow Breathing Theory”, *New York Times*, Jan 21, 1927, 36.

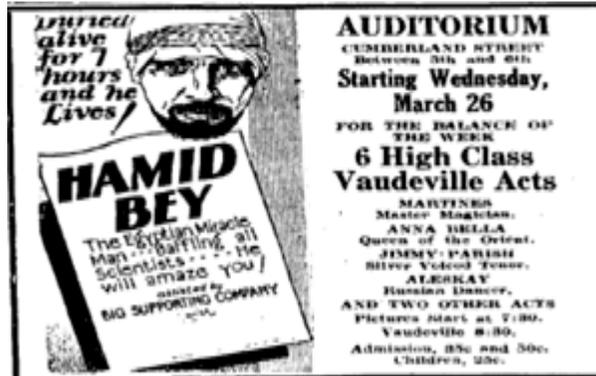


Fig 5. *Lebanon Daily News*, Lebanon, Pa., Mar 22, 1930, p. 9

However records have clearly shown that the earlier folklore concerning Ali's employment history was a façade because as an adolescent, Ali was involved in other sectors of the economy.

The *1898 Norfolk City Directory* records reflected that both Thomas Drew and his father who lived in 279 Princess Anne Avenue were hired as common “laborers”, as opposed to Ali's gypsy wandering between 1886 and 1902. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Norfolk emerged as a middle-sized southern port city and commercial hub that lured many African-Americans from farms and small towns in Virginia, North Carolina and Maryland including the Drews. The growth in the city's manufacturing and transportation fortunes provided uneducated blacks such as Ali and his adoptive father with labourers' jobs in lumbering factories, cotton knitting mills, cigarette, tobacco companies or shipbuilding plants.<sup>36</sup> However, like many black Norfolk laborers, the Drews were paid little and could not obtain the economic advancements to catapult themselves into the black middle bourgeoisie class.

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<sup>36</sup> Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk, Virginia* (University of California Press, 1993), 13.

By 1900, the illiterate, single Thomas Drew was employed as a “farmhand” in the rural dimension of Norfolk’s economy.<sup>37</sup> The fourteen year old Drew probably worked in one of Norfolk’s truck farming regions in the urban fringe to supplement the Drews’ household income. Most of the Norfolk County rural labor force in the early 1900s depended on black female and children to supply seasonal labor as strawberry hands or pickers of other produce like sweet potatoes, tomatoes and peas.<sup>38</sup> Though Drew only worked for eight months as an agricultural laborer, his salary was still comparable to a domestic earning and enjoyed predetermined hours and daily pay.

His adoptive father, the forty year old James W. Drew worked as a longshoreman in one of Norfolk’s collection of maritime and port companies in 1900.<sup>39</sup> Ali’s adoptive mother, Lucy Drew, who was unable to read or write, faced an extremely limited range of employment choices and hence found employment as a “laundress” like most unskilled black women in the labour-intensive domestic service.<sup>40</sup> Her hours were typically long, wages fluctuating and irregular. Thomas Drew’s adoptive mother found the arduous tasks of ironing and washing for a regular clientele for several white families stigmatic and degrading. To support his family, Thomas followed in his adoptive father’s footsteps as a “wharf longshoreman” within the next decade loading and unloading barrels of freight.<sup>41</sup> While Norfolk’s waterways have traditionally been an

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Drew, 1900 Census.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, 62.

<sup>39</sup> James W. Drew, 1900 Census, line 14.

<sup>40</sup> Lucy Drew, 1900 Census.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Drew, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 Population*, line 86, State of Virginia, Norfolk County, Supervisor’s District No. 2, Enumeration District No. 44, Fourth Ward of City, Sheet No. 1B, Enumerated on Apr 15, 1910. A 1910 Census could not locate a Thomas Drew residing in Norfolk, Virginia. However, my research brought up an illiterate, single, African-American “Thomas Unknown”, born in 1885 who worked as a wharf longshoreman and lodged at 205 Nicholson St., Norfolk, Virginia. Thomas Unknown was definitely Thomas Drew upon examining the identity of Thomas

exclusive job preserve of African-Americans for several generations as longshoremen, stevedores, deckhands, oyster shucking and deckhands, these jobs were low-paying and characterized by arduous working conditions that proved little better than backbreaking farm-labor and they were treated roughly on the wharves by overseers.<sup>42</sup> As such, in 1909 and 1910, James W. Drew held several other laborer jobs as a plasterer and a carpenter while Thomas began considering new prospects in other cities.<sup>43</sup>

Between 1910 and 1916, Drew moved out of Norfolk, Virginia to work as a porter in Richmond, Virginia, thus lending strength to the popular legend surrounding Ali's early vocation in the railroad industry first mooted by Bontemps and Conroy claiming Ali started as an expressman in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>44</sup> In Richmond though, he adopted other aliases as shown by A. Bruseaux, the head of the Keystone National Detective Agency at 47<sup>th</sup> and South Parkway, Chicago, Illinois who revealed that Ali adopted the name "Eli Drew".<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, the *1916 Richmond City Directory* located an Eli Drew, an African-American porter living at 1422 Moore, Richmond, Virginia with Edward Gus Sulley, a colored driver. Just as important was the identity of his neighbour, Joshua Mosby, a colored butcher residing at 1419 Moore, Richmond, Virginia who transformed himself into Ali's leading lieutenants as Sheik J. Mosby El of MSTA Temple #

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Unknown's household head, the 79 years old Joshua Whiting. In 1901, Joshua Whiting was a neighbor residing at 172 Princess Anne Avenue where the Drews lived a stone's throw away at 152 Princess Anne Avenue, a mere 72 feet away.

<sup>42</sup> Lorenzo Johnston Greene, Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (Wildside Press LLC, 2008), 113.

<sup>43</sup> 1909 Norfolk City Directory, 193, Norfolk 1910 City Directory, 193.

<sup>44</sup> Arna Bontemps, Jack Conroy, *Anyplace But Here* (University of Missouri, 1997)

<sup>45</sup> "6 Held to Grand Jury," 4.

6 in 1225 N. James Street by 1928.<sup>46</sup> From Richmond, Ali journeyed to neighbouring Newark, New Jersey and lived in the northern city for four years between 1917 and 1920.

The World War I Draft Registration Card and 1920 Census revealed that throughout these years, Ali resided in 181 Warren Street, Newark, New Jersey, a mixed neighbourhood consisting of working-class black migrants from the South and white European immigrants from Italy and Russia. Devoid of biological ties and estranged in a new city, Drew gravitated towards and boarded in a rented unit with Louise Atkins Gaines (born June 1876) a married African-American with whom he shared common Virginian roots.<sup>47</sup>

93	Gaines, Louise	Head	2K	F	B	44	M
	Drew, Thomas	Boarder	"	M	B	34	S

Fig 6. Thomas Drew, 181 Warren St, Newark, N.J, “Preacher” on “Public Streets”

1920 US Census. Ancestry.com

While the exact nature of their relationship remains speculative, Gaines was plausibly Ali’s first convert to embrace the embryonic, proto-Moorish Science teachings as she permitted Drew to use their shared unit as a cosmological site for Professor Drew, the Egyptian Adept’s two hours daily spiritual consultation sessions.

Contrary to Moorish fables asserting Ali’s move to Newark, New Jersey was dictated by a spiritual calling to establish the Canaanite Temple in 1913, Drew’s motivations was financially driven. In 1917, Thomas Drew found his economic fortunes intertwined with global events impacting the Submarine Boat Corporation (SBC). The SBC was actually a subsidiary of Electric

<sup>46</sup> Eli Drew, *1916 Richmond City Directory*, 498, 1143; Joshua Mosby, *1916 Richmond City Directory*, p. 912

<sup>47</sup> Louisa Gaines, line 34, 181 Warren St., Newark, N.J, 1920 Census.

Boat Company formed in 1899 specializing in the construction and sales of submarines to international clients Russia and Japan in 1904 and Britain in the Great War. On Sep 14, 1917, Henry Carse (b. 1866), the SBC President, a white New Yorker with Scottish origins signed an agreement with the US government who recently entered the Great War by committing to build 150 cargo vessels, 28 ways and steel-fabrication workshops.<sup>48</sup> This generated a huge demand for labor to expedite the construction project and advertisements were placed in Southern newspapers to attract African-Americans with jobs that awaited them. Possessing working experience on Norfolk's piers, Drew answered America's call in the industrial war effort by working in the second largest shipyard in the United States as a "laborer" for the SBC in Port Newark, New Jersey.<sup>49</sup> His labor, along with 25,000 others contributed towards the breathtaking rate of construction where by May 30, 1918, the first ship was launched. By 1918, the laborers completed 118 cargo ships aggregating 598,850 pounds.<sup>50</sup> Apart from contributing to the war effort, Drew's labouring experiences on the waterways of Norfolk and Newark also provided material to be romantically weaved into future Moorish sermons about his adventurous past as a merchant seaman who travelled to the exotic spiritual East.<sup>51</sup>

While assiduously laboring on Port Newark, Drew appeared before the local draft board on Sep 12, 1918 as part of the Third National Draft Registration where there was a high possibility of him being inducted into the armed forces due to the disproportionate percentage of

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<sup>48</sup> Mike H. Rindskopf, *Steel Boats, Iron Men: History of US Submarine Force*, (Turner, 1994), 62.

<sup>49</sup> Drew, 1918 WWI Draft Registration Card.

<sup>50</sup> James S. Reyburn, *Electric Boat Corporation*, (Arcadia Publishing, San Francisco, California, 1996), 7-8.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, 16.

African-Americans enlisted. Upon concluding the routine administrative routines and physical examination, board officials classified Drew to have “failed” the criteria for induction.<sup>52</sup> In any case, an armistice signed two months later on Nov 11, 1918 ending the Great War, nullified the significance of Drew’s registration in the first place. Still, Drew’s draft registration was fundamental in debunking yet another lingering MSTA legend where Ali and pacifist Moors refused to fight for racist America in World War I and were persecuted as conscientious objectors.<sup>53</sup>

On the flip side of the coin, Drew’s appearance before the draft board and contribution towards American industrial war effort did not represent a demonstration of his fealty to the state but rather a means of economic survival. This was reflected by the arrest of Sheik J. Mosby El for seditious charges in late May 1928 as his controversial exhortations of “*To hell with the American flag: down with the white people!*” on top of a step ladder in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the hasty revision of the name of Ali’s religious organization from its original inception as the “Moorish Temple of Science” on Nov 26, 1926 to the more patriotic-sounding “Moorish Science Temple of America” on May 21, 1928 barely days after Mosby’s detention represented a defensive attempt at creating a loyal pro-American façade ahead of hearings for charges of treason.<sup>55</sup> After a second police raid on Mosby’s Richmond Temple on Jun 7, 1928, the need to further entrench his movement’s image as a respectable religious movement became even more pertinent. Ali promptly reacted a month later by incorporating the MSTA as a religious

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<sup>52</sup> Drew, WWI Draft Card.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, 28.

<sup>54</sup> “Police Put Prophet in Jail for Preaching Race Sedition: Leader of Red Flag Order Dragged Away in Midst of Harangue Against Stars and Stripes of White Supremacy”, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, May 21, 1928, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Moorish Temple of Science and MSTA Incorporation Papers, *Schomburg Archives*.

organization on Jul 20, 1928. In the very first edition of the *Moorish Guide*, Ali rationalized this as a clear attempt to re-align the movement to American values and principles, “*This religious organization is secured and safeguarded in the very constitution of the United States for in reality it makes the ordinary man or woman a better citizen for they realize what citizenship means. It teaches loyalty to the nation and teaches respect for law and order...it does not mean that there is anywhere in the program an idea for a mammoth pilgrimage to some other country*”<sup>56</sup> Ali’s pragmatism in steering the MSTA away from its early seditious streak towards a fervent patriotic blueprint was crucial in ensuring the MSTA’s survival and growth because this paradigm shift in July 1928 occurred so close to its First National Convention in October 1928 when Ali consolidated and expanded his outreach.

The end of the Great War marked a turning point in Ali’s life as the SBC went into a postwar shipping slump because the unsound decision to construct disposable cargo vessels rather than submarines in WWI meant Drew’s labor was no longer required.<sup>57</sup> Faced with another economic setback, Drew realized that upward socio-economic mobility remained a distant dream and entered into an alternative black spiritual universe to propel towards the riches of capitalism while challenging racist and socio-economic barriers. To successfully compete with rival Oriental Scientists who proclaimed themselves Professors, Princes, Seers, Mystics, Palmists and Healers peddling their esoteric Eastern wisdom since the turn of the twentieth century, Thomas shed his earlier past as the struggling Southern migrant and re-invented himself as a

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<sup>56</sup> “Organization’s Growth Enormous Temples in All Principle Cities”, *Moorish Guide*, Volume 1, No.1, Aug 24, 1928, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Reyburn, 7-8.

Professor Drew, the Egyptian Adept Student, enhancing the aura of his cosmological powers.<sup>58</sup> By 1920, Drew's evolution was clearly evident in the Census records as he no longer identified himself as a working class laborer but declared to the enumerator that his profession was a "preacher" on the "public streets" of Newark.<sup>59</sup> The re-sculpting process of severing Ali's past affiliations as a laborer, farmhand and porter was a fundamental cornerstone for Ali's Moorish religious popularity among 1920s urban African-Americans who had the proclivity to gravitate towards leaders from the upper echelons as opposed to one from traditional black servile occupations. The radical change from Thomas Drew to Professor Drew and Noble Drew Ali also necessitated that the new religious personae rewrite a novel exotic past in substitute for Drew's actual past to accommodate to black Americans' stereotypical perception of such religious leaders' spiritual source of power and knowledge as derived from an imagined East transcending America.

#### IV. Mystical Spiritual Wanderings

Folklores surrounding Ali's mystical spiritual wanderings between 1900 and 1913 advanced that the Prophet embarked on a journey spanning nations as diverse as Egypt, Morocco, India, Saudi Arabia and England where he was received by a constellation of personalities ranging from priests, politicians and Sufi scholars. The common thread binding these stories was that each foreign representative unveiled sacred knowledge before conferring legitimacy on Ali to begin his evangelical mission to "Islamicize" black America. However, such mystical sojourns did not materialize as documents divulged that Thomas Drew was still based in

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<sup>58</sup> Jacob S. Dorman, "A True Moslem is a True Spiritualist: Black Orientalism and Black Gods of the Metropolis", 128-133 in Curtis, Sigler, ed, *The New Black Gods*.

<sup>59</sup> Drew, 1920 Census.

Norfolk, Virginia during the time period. Still, Ali's mythical periods of devotional learning revealed Ali to be a shrewd leader in connecting his spiritual leadership to various cosmological sites of power to expand his range of potential clientele while refusing to be shackled to a single orthodox faith.

Abdullah Ahari, an eclectic white Sufi Moorish-American historian, convincingly argued that these vernacular legends were imagined interpolations by Ali's followers to bridge the absence of information on Ali's pre-Moorish past, "*Seeing that Drew Ali told so little of his early life, either he or his followers tended to write or make legends about his childhood and life before his Chicago Mission from stories found in the Bible and the Aquarian Gospels as they tend to believe that all Prophets live a similar life and have similar mission*".<sup>60</sup> In their posthumous veneration of Ali, they retrospectively chronicled Ali's biography based on a superimposition of the apocryphal Jesus' religious wanderings to India, Tibet, Egypt and Greece from the *Circle Seven Koran* onto Ali's absent biography. In 1933, four years after Ali's death, R. Francis Bey, a devout Moorish believer insisted in the *Baltimore African-American* that Ali studied and meditated for 18 years in Africa and Asia Minor.<sup>61</sup> By early 1960s, another follower contended that Ali converted to Islam in Morocco whose King granted Ali permission to propagate Islam in America.<sup>62</sup> Another disputed that in Oct 1976, Ali performed a pilgrimage to

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<sup>60</sup> Ahari, 205. The Aquarian Gospels referred to a New Age text written by Levi H. Dowling in 1908 that unveiled Jesus' 18 years of missing history from the Bible of which selected chapters were worked into Ali's Circle Seven Koran.

<sup>61</sup> R. Francis Bey, "Afro Readers Say", *Afro-American* (Baltimore, Md), Sep 23, 1933, 18.

<sup>62</sup> E. U. Essien Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1962), 34.

Saudi Arabia where he received a charter from Sultan Abdul Aziz ibn Saud.<sup>63</sup> These narratives that teleported Ali to Islamic nations stemmed from MSTA followers' desire to defend their theological doctrines from Sunni accusations of blasphemy. However, such tenuous connections of Ali's source of knowledge to an international Islamic nobility only tantamount to a forceful imposing a false "textbook Islamic framework" on Ali who resisted any alteration of his Moorish doctrines in spite of Satti Majid, a Sudanese Islamic missionary's attempts to obtain *fatwas* levelled against Ali from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>64</sup>

In 1976, a *Moorish Press* article departed from earlier "Sunni-fied" pilgrimage narratives espousing Drew journeyed to Egypt to be initiated by a high priest after successfully navigating his way out of the vast elaborate labyrinth of the Pyramid of Cheops blindfolded, a narrative that has featured prominently in academic texts.<sup>65</sup> By the 1990s, Ravanna Bey from the Moorish Academy of Chicago, exaggerated the saga of Drew's Egyptian sojourn by painting Ali as a Sufi saint who graduated from Al-Azhar University, Cairo and was inducted into a the *Ikhwan al-safa* (Brotherhood of Purity), an esoteric Sufi order under the tutelage of Egyptian reformers Muhammad Rashid Rida and Aziz Ali al-Masri Bey.<sup>66</sup>

Though Drew's mystical trip to Egypt did not occur, this myth significantly revealed Ali's appropriation of rituals, titles and religious culture from Freemasonry and black Shriners.

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<sup>63</sup> Moorish Press, Oct 1976, cited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, *Mission to America, Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America* (University Press of Florida, 1993), 82.

<sup>64</sup> Curtis, "Debating the Origins", 78-84; Ahmed I. Abu Shouk, J.O. Hunwick and R.S. O' Fahey, "A Sudanese Missionary to the United States: Satti Majid, Shaykh Al-Islam in North America and His Encounter with Noble Drew Ali, Prophet of the Moorish Science Temple movement", *Sudanese Africa*, Vol. 8, 1997, 137-191.

<sup>65</sup> Clifton Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Bilalians: The Resurrection, Transformation and Change of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America: 1930-1995* (Lanham, USA ; 1996), 29, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Ravanna Bey, "The Moorish American Prophet Noble Drew Ali", (unpublished, undated)

This was highly unsurprising considering Thomas Drew's exposure to the significant number of Masonic lodges and nondenominational churches operating in Norfolk, Virginia from 1900 to 1913. Barely 200 feet away from Drews' home in 279 Princess Anne Avenue, the Ancient Knights of the Jerusalem Temple, a black Masonic lodge was established in 1908 along 249-253 Princess Anne Avenue replacing the colored First Universalist Church and Universalist Mission School.<sup>67</sup> In 1910, a Theosophy Building was instituted on 331 Dickson Building, Norfolk printing esoteric texts like Levi H. Dowling's *Aquarian Gospels of Jesus* that would be used in the future by Drew in Newark both in his personae as Professor Drew, the Egyptian Adept, to inquisitive clients desiring knowledge of 18 years of Christ's silent life as well as Noble Drew Ali, the Moorish American Prophet in binding his *Circle Seven Koran*.

While such pretzel shifts in his followers' tales of Ali's spiritual traverses seem to dilute its authenticity, these myths are real for MSTA Sheiks who continue to faithfully emulate Ali's international pilgrimages as acts of piety. Retracing the Prophet's footsteps were also political designs to bolster their own legitimacy by attaching themselves to the perceived source of Ali's cosmological powers in the East. James Lomax Bey, the ousted Sheik of Detroit Temple # 4, in his alchemic transmutation into Ali Mehmed Bey and Professor Ezaldeen travelled extensively to Turkey from 1930 till 1932. Later, he studied in Egypt from 1932 till 1936 where his followers asserted Bey worked as a pyramid tour guide and attained the highest *maulana* degree in Al-Azhar University though veritable evidence pointed instead to his involvement in the General Centre World Young Men Muslim Association in Cairo.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Kirkman Bey's soliloquy

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<sup>67</sup> 1898 Norfolk City Directory, 678, 1908 Norfolk City Directory, 853.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimages to Islam*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 33, Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood* (Clarity Press, Inc., 2005), 243.

in 1942 to FBI Agents divulged an obvious mimicry of Ali's travels, "*when I was two years old, my parents took me to Egypt. I had 12 years schooling in Egypt and India. I attended Cairo University in Egypt for 6 years, and Delhi University, India for 6 ½ years.... I speak the Arabic language, and also read and write in this language. I also read and write the Syrian language.*"<sup>69</sup> The rivalry to retrace Ali's footsteps resurfaced again in 1990 when Sheik Jerry Lewis-Bey led a delegation of the Beys of Missouri group to Morocco to relocate their ancestors where they were received at ministerial level; barely two years after Isa Muhammad photographed himself donning a fez in Morocco in his publication, *Who was Noble Drew Ali?* in 1988.<sup>70</sup>

However such myths relocating Ali in diverse Islamic homelands have problematically relegated Ali's movement to a subservient periphery. Dennis Walker, an academic, went further by equating such myths as symptomatic of Ali's failed impulse to connect the MSTA to the larger international community of Islam,

*"Drew Ali... and his narrative that the Sultan of Morocco commissioned him to restore African-Americans to their original Islam... (was) a theoretical recognition that Arab leaders in faraway Eastern countries have custodianship of the authentic Islam and that the African-American Asiatic Moors in America, to be true Muslims, have to take a form of Islam that they validate. There was here a basis or impulse for affiliation by this American sect to the Islamic World...overall Drew Ali's sect failed in his lifetime as an attempt to reconnect*

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<sup>69</sup> Exhibit No. 25, p. 191, Interview of Kirkman-Bey, *FBI Files MSTA*.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, 48.

*the peoples of the Arab Islamic world and American blacks through a restoration of the Islamic religion among the latter.”*<sup>71</sup>

This penchant to pigeonhole Ali as an insecure figure who desired legitimization from a higher, external Eastern authority missed the point in two important ways.

First, Drew’s religious convictions actually emerged from essentially local, vernacular religious influences of Protestantism and Masonry found in the streets, storefront churches, Masonic lodges and street alleys of Norfolk, Richmond, Va. and Newark, New Jersey. Drew’s religious roots were likely traced to denominations of black Protestant churches in Norfolk, Virginia where the Methodist and Baptist churches drew the largest black congregational memberships.<sup>72</sup> When Drew lived in 279 Princess Anne Avenue, Norfolk, Va. in 1898, he was probably influenced by Reverend John T. Matthew, his neighbour at 263 Princess Anne Avenue and a pastor for the Zion African Baptist Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>73</sup> Fascinatingly between 1903 and 1907, there was also a Reverend J.W. Drew, a pastor from the Mount Zion Baptist Church operating along Princess Anne Avenue, who uncannily shared the exact same initials as his adoptive father.<sup>74</sup>

Ali’s Protestant background stood in stark contrast to writers like Michael Gomez who advocated Ali learnt Islam from African Muslim slaves in coastal Georgia based on geographical proximity to Ali’s supposed birthplace of North Carolina. This was flawed not only because Drew was raised in Norfolk, Virginia rather than North Carolina, but also because his illiteracy

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<sup>71</sup> Walker, *Islam*, 222-223.

<sup>72</sup> Lewis, 70-71.

<sup>73</sup> 1898 Norfolk City Directory, 188.

<sup>74</sup> 1902 Norfolk City Directory, 975, 1903 Norfolk City Directory, 831.

meant he could not access these antebellum Muslims' writings.<sup>75</sup> Such a narrative merely revealed a sensationalized connection of antebellum Islam and post-bellum Islam in America with Drew harnessed as a false in-between bridge. Karl Evanzz, another author, also wrongly postulated that Drew was an early member Ahmadiyya community in America.<sup>76</sup> Ali's Ahmadiyya influences were highly contentious since the FBI source he depended, the *Christian Quarterly Review* in Jan 1942, came from a flawed biography of Ali founding a sect in Chicago in 1916 when Drew was actually based in Richmond, Virginia. Drew's unsubstantiated Ahmadiyya ties were affirmed by G.H. Bousquet, who admitted in the *Moslem World* in 1935 that such claims were merely hypothetical assumptions.<sup>77</sup> Other embellished theories such as Ravanna Bey's claims of Drew's family conversion to Islam in New York City in the 1880s by proselytizing Egyptian Muslim reformers such as Jamal din-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh were also far removed from Drew's local, Protestant religious beginnings in Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>78</sup>

Second, Ali never intended to "Sunni-fy" his movement as he was barely interested in amorphous theological distinctions between heresy and orthodoxy that Islamic *ulama* (scholars) were unduly concerned. As far as Ali was concerned, his Moorish Science faith that originated from an arrangement of eclectic sources including Protestantism, Masonry and Theosophy was orthodox, authentic and required no deferential justification from others. Seen from this perspective, Ali's astute appropriation of allegorical stints of learning from Eastern Islamic scholars and Western political figures clearly illustrated an independent, empowered figure who

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad*, (Pantheon, 1999), 64.

<sup>77</sup> G.H. Bousquet, "Moslem Religious Influences in the United States", *Muslim World*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan 1935), 43.

<sup>78</sup> Bey, "Moorish American Prophet".

reinforced his divine powers by connecting to multiple centres of power in the East without any theological compromises or re-alignments.

## V. Ali & the Canaanite Temple in Newark, New Jersey

Most accounts of Ali's religious genesis began with his founding of the Canaanite Temple in 1913 Newark, New Jersey without actually probing its veracity and accuracy. Interestingly, Ali himself never utilized the term "Canaanite Temple" in his literature. At best, he indirectly insinuated his pre-1925 beginnings in *Koran Questions* No. 9 and 10 claiming the MSTA was founded in Newark, New Jersey in 1913 but without actually revealing the name of this proto-MSTA Temple, its exact location or its doctrines.<sup>79</sup>

Contrary to Ali's declaration, his phase of religious leadership did not actually begin in 1913 in Newark, New Jersey as the draft card revealed Drew to be a laborer by the SBC in Port Newark in 1918. Rather, this skimpily described religious past was crafted by Ali to suppress his proto-Moorish, Newark identity as Professor Drew and to veil the historical truth that the actual Canaanite Temple was founded by Abdul Hamid Suleiman (1864-?), an immigrant from Khartoum, Sudan who founded the Temple as part of his larger Ancient Mecca-Medina of Ancient Free and Operative Masons, a network of black Mohammedan-Masonic movements operating in various cities in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>80</sup> Still, Drew's evolution from Professor Drew to Prophet Noble Drew Ali in Newark City demonstrated Drew's organizational genius in

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<sup>79</sup> Ali, *Koran Question*. In fact, the first mention of the first evidence of the Canaanite Temple in association with Ali's MSTA rooted from Sister Eunice El's 1956 article. Also, the MSTA Collection in the Schomburg Archives contains a grainy photo of a two-storey building of the supposed Temple with the title "Rebirth Place of Islam in America, 1913 AD in Newark, New Jersey".

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Bowen, "Abdul Hamid Suleiman and the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple", *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Religion*, Vol. 12, Issue 13 (Sep 2011), 1-54.

his (a) shrewd rewriting of the Newark's historical religious past by erasing Suleiman's tutelage over the Canaanite Temple and interpolating himself into MSTA literature, (b) his calculated selecting of a potent surname Ali to boost his image among African-Americans, and (c) opportunism in seizing advantage of the disintegrating remains of Suleiman's Canaanite Temple in 1923 to fashion out the earliest stirrings of Moorish Temple of Science and (d) retaining Mecca-Centric elements of the Canaanite past into the MSTA to attract former Canaanite followers.

In April 1923, the popularity of Suleiman's colored Canaanite Temple at the corner of Bank and Rutgers St., Newark nosedived when Suleiman and his assistant, Muhammad Ali, were charged and arrested by the Supreme Court of New Jersey for carnal abuse of a follower's child.<sup>81</sup> With the leaders embroiled in legal matters, a bitter struggle for the temple's power and purse strings followed. One faction renamed itself as Canaanite Temple No. I, based at 102 Morton St., Newark and legally incorporated itself for the purpose of "*religious worship and teaching of religion, Moslam and Islan*".<sup>82</sup> Professor Drew, the Egyptian Adept Moslem who resided a mere 3 miles away from Canaanite Temple No. 1 was not oblivious to the confusion within the leadership echelons of Suleiman's Temple.

Amidst the leadership vacuum, Professor Drew reinvented himself as a religious prophet by deliberately suffixing the powerful surname "Ali" that connected him to three important sources of authority in the minds of black urban masses; Caliph Alee (599-661), the imagined founding father of Masonry and son-in-law of Islamic Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah, Duse Muhammad Ali (1866-1945), an inspirational pan-Africanist Garveyite intellectual who dabbled

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 25-27.

<sup>82</sup> *The Canaanite Temple No. 1 Incorporation Papers*, May 31, 1924.

with Masonry and the incarcerated Mohammed Ali, the influential local chief organizer for the Canaanite Temple. As Canaanite Temple No. 1 had legally incorporated in Newark in 1924, Drew embarked on an evangelical crusade elsewhere under a new Moorish banner to re-structure Hamid Suleiman's satellite temples in New York and Ohio and travelled to Southern cities of North Carolina, South Carolina and Norfolk, Virginia before establishing his headquarters at Chicago, Illinois in 1925.

Drew's future silence on Suleiman and the Canaanite Temple from 1913 till 1925 was understandable considering it was not pioneered by him. Narrations of Ali's days in Newark by MSTA followers involved an amalgamation of truth and reverse role-playing where Ali was depicted as the original founder while Suleiman instigated its breakdown. Sister Eunice El revealed that,

*“The Prophet...also founded the Canaanite Temple in the year 1913 in Newark, New Jersey. He had over 900 members. After a period of time, a man came to Newark from Sudan, Egypt teaching languages. In his last speech in Newark, the Prophet said Justice would overtake him the language teacher for scattering his children. It did! He was soon arrested in New York City and jailed on charges of being an imposter.”<sup>83</sup>*

This was clearly a description of Suleiman who prided himself as a master of the Arabic language to newspaper reporters and was later arrested in New York City in 1927 for fraudulently swindling a customer's money. Significantly, this meant that Ali was *not* the founder of the Canaanite Temple and a better estimated starting date of the proto-MSTA

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<sup>83</sup> Eunice El, 1.

movement would be 1923, rather than 1913, as Suleiman's grip over the Canaanite Temple eroded.

Yet in Ali's radical surgery of the remnants of Suleiman's temple into the MSTA, he also ingeniously preserved several elements of the Canaanite Temple's Mecca-Medina blueprint to attract Suleiman's former followers. First, Ali's *Koran* contained a pictorial insertion of Sultan Ibn Abdul Aziz, the King of Mecca clearly representing a transcended outgrowth of Suleiman's earlier claims to legitimacy through a fez signed by Hassan Hissien, Grand Sherrif of Mecca.<sup>84</sup> Second, Ali's *Koran Questions*' glorified eulogy of Mecca, as opposed to Morocco, in portraying the former as the modern twentieth-century equivalent of the biblical Garden of Eden whose cosmological purity was guarded by angels divulged a spill-over effect from Suleiman's Meccentric proclivities.<sup>85</sup> Third, Ali's MSTA uncannily paralleled Suleiman's Canaanite Temple in its firm rejection of Christianity as a pre-requisite prior to membership. Fourth, a popular myth propagated by Ali concerning his travel to Washington D.C to obtain authority to preach Islam appeared to be an exaggerated imitation of Suleiman's 1922 high profile visit to the capital to convince Caesar R. Blake, the Imperial Potentate of Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine to submerge the latter's movement into his Mecca-Medina Temple. This particular myth has been another source of contention where different Moorish factions disagreed whether this event took place in 1913 with President Woodrow Wilson, 1925 with President Calvin Coolidge or whether it even took place at all.<sup>86</sup> After Ali's death, these myths

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<sup>84</sup> Bowen, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Ali, *Koran Questions* No. 53, 54 and 68.

<sup>86</sup> Timothy Dingle El, *The Resurrection of the Moorish Science Temple: Notes from the Adept Chamber*, (Magribine Press, Chicago, 2006), 70 argued for 1913 but Sheik Way El, , p. 17 begged to differ rooting for the 1925 version. Those who claimed Ali's visit to the White House was symbolic included Wilson, 6-7 who claimed Drew merely wrote to Woodrow Wilson while Keith Moore, *Moorish*

continued to inspire future Moorish leaders to court discussions with American Presidents such as Joshua Traylor Bey who wrote several letters to President Herbert Hoover in 1931 and 1932 before controversially appearing in the White House without an appointment, to no avail.<sup>87</sup>

Patrick Bowen's seminal study of Abdul Hamid Suleiman has reinvigorated the quest to explore Ali's actual relationship to the Canaanite Temple in Newark further. And my comparative study of Ali's MSTAs with Suleiman's Canaanite Temple suggested that Professor Drew opportunistically reinvigorated the Canaanite Temple from its splintered Meccentric leadership in 1923 Newark to a powerful religious Moorish American faith before cunningly rewriting Suleiman out of the religious texts.

## VI. Conclusion

Overall, the essay aims at elucidating light on Ali's past before he adorned the MSTA fez between 1886 and 1924 as Thomas Drew by examining external empirical sources to enhance academic scholarship on black American Islam. Such an approach has engendered an accurate portrait of Ali's reinvention as Thomas Drew, Eli Drew, Professor Drew and Prophet Noble Drew Ali who transcended socio-economic and religious issues afflicting African-Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. As Drew essentially rooted from the same socio-economic class as his followers and underwent a similar rural-urban, South-North transition, this allowed him a strategic insight into the psyche of his converts. Ali's sensitive intuition of the urban African-American spiritual pulse facilitated his successful transformation into a genuine religious leader

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*Circle Seven: The Rise of the Islamic Faith Among Blacks in America and its Masonic Origins*, (AuthorHouse, 2005), 73 felt that the supernatural feats undertaken by Ali in front of American Presidents diluted the veracity of the account such that he argued that Ali probably visited the Library of Congress.

<sup>87</sup> "Herbert Hoover Dodges Grand Sheik of the Moors", *Afro-American*, Feb 4, 1933, 13.

for his people and effective creation of his religious vehicle, the MSTA, for the better future of his converts. Scrutinizing the gulf between the empirical and mythical Ali also demonstrated his skillful evangelizing methods centered on constructing a “new” past to serve his needs as a newly emergent Prophet in black urban America in 1925.

While this new empirical portrayal of Ali iconoclastically unraveled deeply engrained Moorish dogma, this should not gnaw away at the religious convictions of present day Moorish believers. Ali’s past as Thomas Drew should not render their myths redundant since the legends clung onto by MSTA followers function as a form of Moorish *hadith* that preserves the Prophet’s legacy through oral and written chains of transmitted faith. Moorish myths also powerfully connect the contemporary MSTA community to their saviour. Conversely, the reconstruction of Ali’s empirical past should galvanize the faith of contemporary followers in their Prophet.

First, discoveries of Ali’s empirical identity has the potential to bind the splintered community through a common shared heritage and stake in their Prophet’s pre-1925 past as several myths have been a source of discord between different Moorish groups. Second, this revisionist biography rescues Ali’s historical legacy from being an object of scorn from the non-MSTA religious community that has been overly eager in condemning such myths as fictitious legends of fantasy. Contrary to the mainstream critiques of Ali as a dubious sage, the empirical Ali effectively counters such negative caricatures by revealing the uneducated Thomas Drew to be a mercurial Orientalist maverick and genuine prophet who sagaciously tapped on his painful past and sensitively appreciated the shifting religious philosophies to opportunistically invent a new religious structure, the MSTA that successfully catered to the spiritual needs of the marginalized black American underclass in the 1920s.