

LESSONS FROM MALCOLM X

By Shahid Athar

I thank all of you for inviting me to give this lecture in the memory of a great American and a great Muslim, Malcolm X, known to us as EL-Hajj Malik Shabaz. It is an honor for an immigrant Muslim who never met Malcolm X to give this lecture. This is due to the recognition of the fact that more and more Americans are turning to Islam and more and more Afro-American Muslims are returning to main-stream Sunni Islam. The dream of universal brotherhood of all American Muslims as envisioned by Malcolm X toward the end of his journey on this planet is coming true. More and more immigrant Muslims are embracing their Afro-American brothers and accepting Malcolm X, whom I called in a previous article "the Prince of Islam in North America," as a true leader of the Islamic movement in the U.S.A.

Today's American Muslims are not the first wave of Muslims who came here. Muslims have tried to come here ever since the 12th century. However, between the 16th and 18th centuries, millions of them were brought here against their own free will. Not only half of 6 million Africans but thousands of fair-skinned slaves of Turkish/Hispanic origin from Morocco, Portugal and Spain, now known as Mullengeons were Muslims.

They were robbed of their names, religion and language and a new identity was given to these once-free people who were made to work and live on plantations. Their sufferings during ocean voyages, on Caribbean holding islands, and upon arrival on the mainland are known to historians. The anger of the Afro-American soul, like that of Malcolm X before Hajj, is the direct result of the oppression that their forefathers suffered.

Thus the re-discovery of this "Lost Found Nation" and appearance of Master Fard and Elijah Muhammad was a situational necessity. Although being a Sunni Muslim, I do not approve of the theological and racial teachings of the Nation of Islam, retrospectively, I think it was the will of God. It was God's way to let Afro-Americans realize their past and enter on a new platform. Once you enter into a house through the wrong door and then realize it, you must get out and re-enter through the front door. Thus many Afro-Americans who entered the House of Islam through the wrong door of the Nation of Islam (NOI) are now re-entering into Islam through the front door. Without NOI, there would have been fewer Afro-American Muslims and, for sure, not a Malik Shabaz.

Historians have divided the life of Malcolm X into 3 periods - a) 1948 to 1964- the NOI period, b) 1964 - the Black Nationalist Period and c) 1964 to 1965 - the

Universalist Islamic Period. However, I divide into only 2 periods, i.e., before Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and after Hajj. Hajj had transformed the black militant Afro-American Nationalist to a true Muslim, a Dayee (Muslim missionary) and an Imam (leader).

Malcolm X as the Militant Black Nationalist

It is important to learn of his revulsion to the oppression and racism from his own words as how he felt the pain. In 1963, while still with NOI, he said "The problem itself was created by the white man and it was created because the white man brought us here in chains against our will. It was a crime. And the one who committed that crime is the criminal who should pay....You don't put the crime in jail, you put the criminal in jail. And kidnaping is a crime. Slavery is a crime. Lynching is a crime.

And the presence of 20 million black people in America against their wil is a living testimony of the crime that Uncle Sam committed, your forefathers committed, when our people were brought here in chains.

"Now, you brought 20 million black people in this country who were brought here and were put in a political, economic and mental prison. This was done by Uncle Sam. And you think when you open the door a few cracks, and give this integration-intoxicated negro a chance to run around the prison yard--that's all he's doing--that you'redoing him a favor." Similarly in January, 1963: "We are trapped in a vicious circle of economic, intellectual, social and political death. Inferior housing, inferior education which in turn leads to inferior jobs. We spend a lifetime in this vicious circle. Or in this vicious cycle going in circles. Giving birth to children who see no hope for the future but to follow our miserable footsteps."

Malcolm X learned that though Christianity preached brotherhood, white America could not deliver it to the "people of color". Thus he said on February 16, 1965 at Corn Hill Methodist church, "I believe in the brotherhood of man. But despite the fact that I believe in the brotherhood of man, I have to be a realist and realize that here in America, we're in a society that doesn't practice brotherhood. It doesn't practice what it preaches.

It preaches brotherhood, but it doesn't practice brotherhood. And because this society doesn't practice brotherhood, those of us who are Muslim--those of us who left the Black Muslim movement and regrouped as Muslims, in a movement based upon orthodox Islam--we believe in the brotherhood of Islam."

Malcolm X at Hajj and After

The experience at Hajj taught him and teaches us that after becoming a legal Muslim by the declaration of Kalima, a Muslim must taste Islam by practicing it within a community of practicing Muslims. The brotherhood, justice and respect for each other's rights that he only dreamed and spoke in the past, was becoming a pleasant reality.

Thus in a letter from Saudi Arabia after Hajj, he wrote "Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad and all the other Prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.

"I have been blessed to visit the Holy City of Mecca, I have made my seven circuits around the Ka'ba, led by a young Mutawaf named Muhammad, I drank water from the well of the Zam Zam. I ran seven times back and forth between the hills of Mt. Al-Safa and Al-Marwah. I have prayed in the ancient city of Mina and I have prayed on Mt. Arafat."

"There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white."

"America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white -- but the white attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color."

"You may be shocked by these words coming from me.

But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought-patterns previously held and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions.

This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to

the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth."

"During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass and slept on the same rug -- while praying to the same God -- with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the white Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana."

"We were truly all the same (brothers) -- because their belief in one God had removed the white from their minds, the white from their behavior, and the white from their attitude."

"I could see from this that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man -- and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their differences' in color."

"With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called Christian' white American heart should be more receptive to a proven solution to such a destructive problem. Perhaps it could be in time to save America from imminent disaster -- the same destruction brought upon Germany by racism that eventually destroyed the Germans themselves."

"Each hour here in the Holy Land enables me to have greater spiritual insights into what is happening in America between black and white. The American Negro never can be blamed for his racial animosities -- he is only reacting to four hundred years of the conscious racism of the American whites. But as racism leads America up the suicide path, I do believe, from the experiences that I have had with them, that the whites of the younger generation, in the colleges and universities, will see the handwriting on the walls and many of them will turn to the spiritual path of truth -- the only way left to America to ward off the disaster that racism inevitably must lead to."

"Never have I been so highly honored. Never have I been made to feel more humble and unworthy. Who would believe the blessings that have been heaped upon an American Negro?"

"A few nights ago, a man who would be called in America a white man, a United Nations diplomat, an ambassador, a companion of kings, gave me his hotel suite, his bed. Never would I have even thought of dreaming that I would ever be a

recipient of such honors -- honors that in America would be bestowed upon a King -- not a Negro."

"All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds."

Thus my friends, I am not here to glorify Malcolm X but the glory belongs to Allah only. Thus let us study a few verses of the Book, also known to us as "The Guide and the Criterion," what we commonly call Quran revealed to Prophet Mohammad (P) over a 23- year period, still unchanged after 1,400 years, still being read by over a billion people and memorized by thousands. It continues to influence the life and morale of Muslims.

Quran says "O you mankind! We have created you from a single pair of male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you know each other (not despise each other). Verily the most honored in the sight of Allah is the one who is most righteous" (49:13).

Quran also says "O you who believe! Be the maintainers of justice and bearers of witness for Allah's sake though it be against your own self, parents and relatives" (4:135).

And it also says "O you believe, stand out firmly for Allah as witness to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others incite you to act unjustly. Be just that is next to piety and fear Allah for Allah is well aware of what you do" (5:8).

Thus it is clear that above verses of Quran guided Malcolm X to righteousness, justice, giving up hate of white people, and standing up to his own godfather on moral issues.

When Malcolm X left the Nation and embraced the true Islam, he was responding to the call of Islam. "O you believe, enter into Islam wholeheartedly and do not follow the footstep of Satan as he is your open enemy" (2:208).

So was Malcolm X a militant Black nationalist or a true Muslim leader? Only history will decide. Islam erases the past as it did to that of Caliph Umar bin Khattab who was a violent man before accepting Islam.

After Hajj, if one's Hajj is accepted, all previous sins are forgiven and one becomes pure like a newborn baby. After Hajj, two good things can happen to a Muslim - one is to live a life of righteousness for the rest of his or her life or not to live long in this world of temptation and to fall prey to wrong. Malcolm X got both of them.

Thus let us bury the Malcolm before Hajj and keep the El Hajj Malik Shabaz alive. Quran says "call not those who are slain in the way of Allah as dead, nay they are living, only you perceive it not" (2:154).

The Legacy of Malcolm X

Let us summarize what Malcolm X did for us.

1. He challenged the African American, Africa, the World of Islam and all humanity to rise and unite.
2. He publicly exposed the false appointed leaders of the Black American and in the process demonstrated the real traits and reason of leadership, i.e., honesty, intelligence, a respect for logic, total submission to Islam, self-sacrifice, brotherhood and uncompromising morality.
3. He awakened the World of Islam to their constructive appointment with destiny. He also exposed the real enemies of Islam and how they must be constrained. His insistence that we must return to the real educational, economic, spiritual and social substance of Islam will not soon be forgotten.
4. He demonstrated that reading, learning and reason were indispensable qualities for the economic and social development of the masses.
5. He proved that mysticism had no place in the World of Islam.
6. He proved, as many before him, that death could be no barrier to the fulfillment of destiny.
7. He attested to the fact that racism has no place in Islam. On December 27, 1964, he said, "Well, this is why Islam is spreading. Islam has no color bar in it at all. There is nothing in Islam that teaches one to judge a man by the color of his skin. No matter what color you are in Islam, you are a Muslim - you are a brother."

We are reminded of the verses of Quran from Surah Al-Fajr as we ponder over the life and death of a great American Muslim.

"O you Soul at Peace
Well pleased and well pleasing
Return to thy Lord
Return as My devotee
Enter into My Heaven"
To God We Belong To Him Is Our Return