

Lessons in the Life and Death of Malcolm X Sh. Yasin Dwyer

Introduction

- Malcolm was a hero/luminary who captured collective imagination/longing of many people globally → central to American history and Muslim History
- This lecture won't be focused on just Malcolm's Muslim identity as he signifies many different things to diverse audiences and movements → attempt to do justice to the complexity of his character
 - o He wasn't always Muslim. He had multiple dimensions/identities to him.
- It's an injustice to collapse this multi-faceted individual into just 1D slogan such as "by any means necessary"
 - o He embodies history of African people in this part of world
 - o African Americans are still African → they found themselves in this part of the world due to slavery but it's important to not forget connections to roots.

African Muslim Heritage

- Malcolm became Muslim while trying to reconnect to his lost Islamic past
 - o "Man who returned"
 - o During the early slave conquest, there was an effort to avoid Muslim Africans. They were described as the most difficult to enslave and the most rebellious
 - o Reference to Dutty Bookman- led the revolution in Haiti during period of enslavement
 - Known as bookman because he always carried 'book' that was associated with 'wudhu' → now known to be the Quran
 - o Reference to the Jamaican slave rebellion led by Mandinka Muslims
- Earliest known contact of Muslims with Americas was through the African American slaves → Malcolm X attempted to revive this lost identity/legacy of struggle

The Racial Environment that Shaped Malcolm X

- He lived during a time of revolution
- In pre-civil rights American environment, black peoples were considered 3/5 of humans. Our people were ex-slaves and lynching, violence, murder was very prominent.
 - o The Klu Klux Klan was also very popular. Their main goal was to deprive black people of economic and social empowerment.

Background

- Malcolm x was born into this environment but his family were active resisters
- Father, Marcus Garvey, founded a movement to emancipate black people globally
 - o There were branches globally including Halifax in 20-30s
- Mother was also member of this organization → Malcolm grew up in home conscious of black identity
 - o His father was murdered as a leader and the family fell apart after his death → Malcolm and his brothers were placed into foster care

- Even in foster care, with all its shortcomings, Malcolm was still a bright student. His gift of speech, intellect, social intelligence was recognized in his all white school.
 - o Malcolm expressed desire to become lawyer as a kid. His teacher discouraged it citing that white people wouldn't trust him and black people wouldn't trust his skills → killed dream/aspiration
 - o Malcolm lost interest and dropped out of school. He looked for fraternity, love, companionship, focus elsewhere in streets/gang culture.
 - o Malcolm was surprisingly very effective and proficient selling drugs and drugs and pimping → worst stereotype imaginable
 - o Eventually, he was convicted and imprisoned. In prison, he was given the nickname Satan: angry, bitter and quite atheistic.

Introduction to Nation of Islam

- While he was in prison, Malcolm's brothers were living in Detroit and told him about the NOI movement they joined
- NOI was founded in the 1930s by WF Muhammad who claimed he was a messianic figure. His follower, Elijah Muhammad, made claims about WF Muhammad and himself that weren't Islamic but appropriated certain Islamic symbols to make it very palatable and appealing to the African-American populous. He claimed black people were part of a lost/found nation that will return to glory it once had.
 - o Also claimed that the nature of black people was divine. It was easy for people to accept these teachings due to their context of lynching, murdering, violence etc.
 - o He also encouraged high level of learning, high aspirations, and ambition.
- Malcolm lost most of his eyesight after he officially entered the NOI in prison → sparked/ignited his ambition to learning

Involvement in the NOI

- When Malcolm first entered the NOI, there were 4 temples and when he left, there were 100 000 temples → he was a major player in building the NOI
 - o Elijah Muhammed wasn't as connected to the people as Malcolm X. Elijah Muhammed was quite ill for most the period while Malcolm preached.
 - o NOI grew quickly under Malcolm's leadership:
 - The movement introduced Islam to black American culture (ex. cultural greeting of *Salam*)
 - o Dawah brought Islamic cultures/symbols to the most needy and marginalized group of people.
- Malcolm was minister in Harlem, NY but quickly became an international figure.
 - o Malcolm said provocative things about white people but the reason he captured such a large following because he represented suffering of black masses so efficiently.
 - o His eloquence scared most people, even most civil rights leader whose approach was very palatable to white America.
 - o Malcolm spoke not to be liked or palatable but to express the suffering of Black America
- Malcolm was referred to as the black racist. He was invited to Harvard in a debate and surprised everyone → he was a brilliant speaker/thinker/intellectual with an 8th grade education.ⁱⁱ
 - o Malcolm was special because he can speak to both the "dope dealer" and "Harvard intellectual". Malcolm knew his people and spoke out of love.
 - o Everyone loved Malcolm X. They recognized he was one of them/ belonged to them.
 - Even if they didn't join NOI, they loved/respected and defended him.

Leaving the NOI

- Elijah Mohamed taught the NOI a strict moral teaching - amongst which was sexual morality
 - o Adultery was forbidden and punished very strictly.
 - o Malcolm found out about Elijah Mohamed's affairs and began to speak about this in a way that was disturbing.
 - o At this point, the NOI was a business enterprise and Malcolm's criticisms were seen as a threat.
- After John F Kennedy was assassinated, NOI leaders were instructed not to speak against him as he loved by black America
 - o Malcolm described it as "chickens come home to roost" meaning the violent murderous atmosphere of hate in America took one of its own leaders.
 - o *"In further criticism of Mr. Kennedy, the Muslim leader cited the murders of Patrice Lumumba, Congo leader, of Medgar Evers, civil rights leader, and of the Negro girls bombed earlier this year in a Birmingham church. These, he said, were instances of other 'chickens coming home to roost'."*ⁱⁱⁱ
 - o Malcolm was kicked out after this interview. There are theories that Intelligence agencies may have also thought it was advantageous to splinter the NOI.

Mainstream Islam

- Malcolm's sister, Ella Collins, was a former member of NOI who accepted mainstream/orthodox Islam.
 - o She sponsored Malcolm X to go to Hajj
 - o **Homework: Read the chapter titled "Mecca" from Malcom X's autobiography**
- In the Muslim/African world, when he was introduced as an American Muslim, he was always mistook for Muhammad Ali
 - o In the movie, Malcolm X (1992), he depicted in Cairo, kneeling and reading Fatiha
 - o Malcolm took his shahada in Al Azhar
 - o He was given the name Amu Wali in Nigeria → attempt to revive African roots
- Malcolm wanted to connect himself with the movement to revive justice for disenfranchised; he became more dangerous outside NOI than inside. In addition, Malcolm made some very important connections globally during his trip.
- When he returned to American, he founded:
 - 1) Muslim Mosque Incorporated- preached traditional Islam for all Americans
 - 2) Organization of Afro American Unity- connected black Americans back to Africa for liberation

Final Years

- In the last few years, enemies from NOI, government and white supremacists mounted pressure but Malcolm kept moving.
- His family suffered. Betty Shabbaz was patient with him, supported him, sacrificed a lot
- Malcolm visited Canada during last few years of life. In his CBC interview, he expressed his new understanding of race relations, struggle, etc.
- During a speech at the Audubon Ballroom, Malcolm was killed with a hail of bullets.
 - o In a testimony from person caught at scene, it was concluded that the assassination organized by temple 25 from New Jersey (caveat: this is still controversial)
 - Thomas Hagan, the person convicted, became Muslim in prison and was released coupled years ago. He seems very remorseful.

Lessons

- 1) Islamic legacy- connected to Muslim community → validates Muslims in west
 - Not just people of African descent but everyone. Malcolm was a universal figure who connects them to Islamic tradition from western perspective
 - He inspired many figureheads today: Suhaib Webb, Hamza Yusuf, Siraj Wahaj and many more
 - Dealt with many issue relevant to us today (ex. Media)
- 2) Validated Islam amongst black Americans.
 - Current movement to substantiate Islam as a colonial religion which should be refuted.
 - He built bridges between Muslims; indigenous and immigrant
- 3) Malcolm lived in a time where racist violence against black people was at a high. If police and government can't or won't protect the people, Malcolm advocated to take safety into own hands. He didn't advocate violence.
- 4) Malcolm left a moral legacy of excellence:
 - He slept most 3 hrs at night
 - Always either reading studying or thinking about what to do for people
 - He ate one meal per day
 - He never chewed gum, wasn't flirtatious, didn't drink or smoke, didn't use bad language
 - Even the FBI (bugged his house, trailed him and listened to everything in last few years) admitted he was a moral human being and could discredit him
- 5) Being consistent- believe in Allah and be steadfast
- 6) Able to admit very easily when wrong
 - Satan racist analogy → felt superior due to him being made of fire → racism is way of Satan
- 7) Intellectual legacy:
 - Before he died he was able to secure scholarship for Black Muslims to study in Cairo university
 - Brilliant with the media

“Keep ur heart busy with God and keep hands busy with the people.”^{iv}

References

ⁱ Sylviane Anna Diouf and Sylviane Kamara. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* New York University Press, 1998, p. 153

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z2hbi79Mc0>

ⁱⁱⁱ "Malcolm X Scores U.S. and Kennedy". *The New York Times*. December 2, 1963. p. 21. Retrieved October 2, 2014.

^{iv} Malcolm X, Alex Haley. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, Grove Press [1965].