

“MOORS KNOW THE LAW”: SOVEREIGN LEGAL DISCOURSE IN MOORISH SCIENCE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUPERSESSION

SPENCER DEW

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Centenary College of Louisiana

ABSTRACT

Among the many individuals and groups espousing affiliation with the Moorish Science Temple of America movement, some continue founding prophet Noble Drew Ali's emphasis on engaging in American citizenship as a religious duty, while others interpret the prophet's scriptures to lend authority to claims of being outside the jurisdiction of American legal authority. Such sovereign Moors, whose actions range from declaration of secession to rejection of drivers or marriage licenses, advance legal discourse rooted in historical narratives, tailor their legal thinking toward practical instruction and efficacious results, and appeal to etymology to further authorize their claims. Such sovereign Moorish legal discourse is best understood, following Catherine Wessinger's work on the Montana Freeman, as "magical," and understanding the magical role played by legal texts and discourse within these communities can help scholars and legal professionals in their approach to and interactions with sovereign Moors.

KEYWORDS: Moorish Science, sovereign citizens, new religious movements, African American religions

INTRODUCTION

"The difference between a black person and a Moor is that Moors know the law and black's [*sic*] do not," writes Chief Noble Bandele El-Amin in his *Moors, Moabite and Man: Reflection and Redemption*.¹ El-Amin's book is straightforwardly instructional, offering readers advice on "correcting their Nationality and status on the record in the US," a process that involves cancelling one's social security number and card, eschewing marriage licenses, and disposing of driver's licenses after filing paperwork to declare one's true national name and citizenship status.² While El-Amin carefully avoids recommending direct violation of criminal law, he nonetheless proceeds under the assumption that conflict with the law is inevitable for his audience. In response, he offers detailed

1 Bandele El-Amin, *Moors, Moabite and Man: Reflection and Redemption* (Middletown: Indigenous Peoples, 2011), 72. There is widespread irregularity in the practices of spelling and grammar among Moorish writers. I have, in this article, eschewed peppering citations from such authors with repeated uses of "*sic*."

2 *Ibid.*, 4.

practical advice for how his readers should negotiate encounters with police officers and with the courts.

El-Amin’s text exemplifies a large and growing genre of books penned and published by individuals espousing sovereign citizen claims within the vocabulary and worldview of the African American religion Moorish Science Temple of America. Indeed, El-Amin is one of the more prominent and prolific sovereign Moorish theorists. In the work of El-Amin and other such contemporary thinkers, claims and terms from the history of the Moorish Science movement, dating back to the 1920s, are reinterpreted in accord with sovereign citizen claims. These sovereign citizen claims, in turn, share characteristics with or represent direct borrowing from a larger cultural milieu, one also inhabited by militia groups and white power movements, radical libertarians, and separatists of various stripes. What distinguishes the umbrella term “sovereign citizen” is rejection, based on reinterpretation of the law and legal and political history, of the authority of the federal government, and, thus, of federal law. Behaviors resulting from some claims play out across a broad spectrum, from rejection of currency, declared secession, and acts or anticipation of armed resistance at one extreme to, at the other, a range of less spectacular actions such as nonpayment of rent, tax protest, or refusal to recognize traffic laws or carry recognized legal forms of identification.³

In this article I discuss several key aspects of sovereign Moorish legal discourse, exploring the teachings of popular contemporary thinkers such as El-Amin. In doing so, I approach sovereign Moorish understanding of law as a *nomos*, a collection of habits and customs, values and beliefs, ways of talking and ways of being, rooted in narratives specific to the Moorish Science Temple of America religious movement, following Robert Cover’s work on law as a “*nomos*” or “normative universe,” maintained by explanatory, meaning-giving narratives and “held together by the force of interpretive commitments—some small and private, others immense and public.”⁴

After I explore the history and characteristics of the Moorish Science Temple of America, as well as the fragmentation of the movement after its founding prophet’s death and the ways in which sovereign logic is authorized via interpretation of the Moorish scriptural canon, I offer examples and analyses of two characteristics of Moorish Science that prove key to authorizing contemporary sovereign Moorish practices: narratives of history and etymological interpretation. From its beginning in the 1920s, Moorish Science emphasized the importance of historical narrative, particularly claims about the origin and ontology of those who became members and thus identified as Moors and how Moors came to find themselves in Jim Crow America under the false label of “negroes.” Moorish religious thought offered explanations for slavery and gave meaning to contemporary American politics. Sovereign Moorish thinkers likewise root their own claims about the law in stories about history, from narratives about imagined Moorish antiquity to narratives that reinterpret the function of such documents as the Fourteenth Amendment and offer new (often sinister and conspiratorial) explanations for everyday aspects of legal life. From its inception, Moorish Science offered a critique of language as a means of constant and subconscious racist oppression. Focus on the names and terms used to describe African Americans called attention to words—their often

3 Michael Barkun, one of the few scholars to address the sovereign citizen phenomenon, writes of the “common ideology” that unites sovereigns into a movement: “even though there is no organizational framework linking sovereign citizens, there is sufficient commonality in their beliefs so that they form a distinctive population.” Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 197.

4 Robert Cover, “The Supreme Court, 1982 Term – Foreword: *Nomos* and Narrative,” *Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 4 (1983): 7.

hidden influences, origins, and meanings. Sovereign Moors therefore appeal to etymology to authorize their claims, proof texting their legal interpretations with eclectic and selective use of dictionaries.

I then argue that the ways sovereign Moors perceive, interpret, and rationalize encounters with the legal authority of the state resembles means of maintaining plausibility employed by those who practice magic, a claim that expands on scholar of new religious movements Catherine Wessinger's argument that sovereign citizens approach legal texts, documents, and discourse "in terms of magic" by drawing on T. M. Luhrmann's ethnographic work with contemporary magicians. The sovereign Moorish legal nomos involves particular ways of reading encounters with the legal establishment such that, no matter how the outcome of such an encounter may look to non-sovereigns, sovereigns see—and are trained to see—evidence of the truth of their own claims. Interactions in court or confrontations with police serve as a feedback loop, reinforcing sovereign claims about the law, in terms both of specific legal interpretations as well as the overarching (magical) power of legal discourse and legal expertise. Moreover, sovereign Moorish claims about the law understand the clash of nomoi to be a problem not of "too much law, but as one of *unclear* law," with sovereigns locating themselves in the same *jurispathic* role Cover describes as the province of the courts.⁵ By conflating their own nomos with the nomos of the state, sovereign Moors represent a path not predicted by Cover, a response to conflict over legal interpretations that is neither a "hermeneutics of resistance or of withdrawal," but, rather, a hermeneutics of supersession, in which the sovereign Moorish nomos is understood as the corrective to and true version of the nomos of the state. Seizing the logic of the state such that legal conflicts are read as problems of "unclear law or difference of opinion about *the* law," sovereign Moors see as central to their identity the educating of the publics and the courts on the law's *true* meaning.⁶ Through close reading of sovereign Moorish texts, a grounding of these texts in and as interpretations of a specific religious history, and an analysis of the way sovereign Moors understand legal power in their own practice and as practiced by the state, this article serves not only to add to understanding of sovereign Moors and their particular claims but also to contribute more broadly to the study of sovereign citizen legal hermeneutics.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

*Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple of America: "[T]hat They Will Be Law-Abiders and Receive Their Divine Rights as Citizens"*⁷

One of the many African American new religious movements to emerge from the Great Migration to northern cities, the Moorish Science Temple of America was founded as "a divine and national movement" by Timothy (or perhaps Thomas) Drew, who adopted the title Prophet Noble Drew Ali (1886–1929).⁸ After an earlier religious experiment in Newark, New Jersey, Drew Ali moved to

5 Ibid., 42 and 40.

6 Ibid., 42.

7 Noble Drew Ali, *A Warning from the Prophet in 1928* (Chicago: Young Men Moorish National Business League, 1928).

8 Fathie Ali Abdat has recently argued, based on the discovery of a World War I draft registration card with an address matching that in the "Prof. Drew, the Egyptian Adept Student" newspaper ad that was the first verified documentation of the man who would become Drew Ali, that he was born Thomas Drew, with a declared birth date of

Chicago around 1925⁹ and shortly thereafter began preaching a religion rooted in Islamic symbolism borrowed from fraternal societies (e.g., the fez, “Allah-God” as the name of the deity); metaphysical Christianity (particularly the New Thought movement, including one gospel, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, sections of which Drew Ali incorporated into his own scripture, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America* or *Circle-Seven Koran*); and the unique political setup of and possibilities offered by the city of Chicago. As a city of ethnic diversity, with semiautonomous neighborhoods wherein immigrant communities kept their own traditions and started their own newspapers, yet also a place wherein such communities were vested in governance and were actively courted as and rewarded for being voters, Chicago represented for Drew Ali a model of Allah-God’s utopian society. Here each individual lived under “his own vine and fig tree” of “national” identity, and yet individuals from assorted nations were all recognized as “Americans.” These “citizens of the USA” were such not, as Drew Ali understood it, in spite of their difference but through such difference, because each citizen acknowledged and proclaimed his or her “national” identity.¹⁰

In short, Drew Ali saw a possibility for African Americans to find full recognition as American citizens, and so he taught that African Americans were “neither black nor colored nor Negro,” but rather Moorish-Americans like other hyphenated ethnic Americans found in the city of Chicago.¹¹ Drew Ali aligned his movement with a particular political party—the Republican machine of

January 8, 1886. Fathie Ali Abdat, “Before the Fez: The Life and Times of Drew Ali, 1886–1924,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 5, no. 8 (2014): 2–3.

- 9 While many Moors (and many early scholars) speak of the founding of the Moorish Science Temple of America as dating to 1913 in New Jersey, this is the date for Drew Ali’s earlier religious experiment, the Canaanite Temple, about which little is known. Likewise, the precise date of Drew Ali’s move to Chicago is not known, but by 1927 there was already a thriving Moorish Science Temple of America community there. See Edward E. Curtis IV, “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. Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 70–90. Some new information about the Canaanite Temple is still being uncovered. See Azeem Hopkins-Bey, *Prophet Noble Drew Ali: Saviour of Humanity* (DeWitt: Ali’s Men Publishing, 2014).
- 10 The vision of “vine and fig tree” is from Drew Ali’s *Holy Koran*. Noble Drew Ali, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America, the Foundations of a Nation* (Lexington: Department of Supreme Wisdom, 2011), 128–29. “Citizen of the USA” was a phrase emblazoned on the Moorish identity cards issued to dues-paying members of the Moorish Science Temple of America. See Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *Anyplace but Here* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 206.
- 11 In the short piece “Nick Named,” Drew Ali writes,

when the forefathers of the Moorish Americans were first brought to this nation they had a nationality and a name, but in order to separate them from the achievements of their fathers a name was given them which had no connection whatever with the founders of civilization. They were nicknamed “negroes.” . . . If you look in some dictionaries you will see that the word negro means a sly person; a coon. If this is not an insult to the illustrious history of a nation there can never be one given. Just as they have saddled on the Moorish Americans the name negro they have also given him a religion that was made to enslave him and stop his progress. It is the duty of every man who lives to redeem the name of his forefathers and not be herded in to a mass of weaklings. Stop referring to yourself as negro, colored and Black for you are neither. If you are men, American citizens speak up for yourselves or it will never be done.

“Nick Named,” *Moorish Guide*, September 28, 1928, Moorish Science Temple Papers, 1926–1967 (box 1, folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City.

In his “A Warning from the Prophet in 1928,” he calls upon all “nations”—all races—to help him in his project of uplifting his own Moors:

Mayor William Hale Thompson, who by 1927 was actively searching for votes in the Second Ward “Black Metropolis” where Moorish Science was based. Early Moorish Science contained teachings about spiritual healing and the nature of divinity within all people, but much of the doctrine written by Prophet Drew Ali emphasized this-worldly concerns, specifically a project of “uplift” predicated on Moorish-Americans embracing the responsibilities of citizenship. Voting was presented as a “sacred duty,” participation in democracy as a necessary step for “salvation.” This attention to the responsibilities of citizenship served three purposes. It offered Moors an orientation in history tackling questions of theodicy, an orientation in discourse addressing the legacy of slavery and racism in America, and an orientation in the present context which motivated behavior and promised improvement on a practical economic level as well as on the level of status.

In assorted speeches, newspaper articles later canonized as scripture, and his *Holy Koran*, Drew Ali taught that African Americans had fallen into slavery as a punishment for abandonment of their identity and its related responsibilities.¹² Ignorance followed, of the glories of Moorish civilization and of Moorish identity generally. Drew Ali claims to have been “prepared” by Allah as a prophet with the mission of alerting the sleeping Moorish nation to their true identity and aiding them in a communal process of “uplift” back into knowledge of—and responsible action rooted in—that identity. Moorish Science, also called Islamism, was the natural religion of so-called black people. While Allah was the god of all “nations” or races, part of Drew Ali’s mission was “to return Christianity to the Europeans,” to white people, and alert Moors that they had drifted from the religion of their ancestors to a religion designed by Allah for a different nation. Drew Ali wrote that he had been sent “to warn my people to repent from their sinful ways and go back to that state of mind to their forefathers’ Divine National principles,” which state of mind would lead to real, practical results in the world. As the quote continues, Drew Ali explains that as Moors recognize, declare, and enact their true identities, “they will be law-abiders and receive their divine rights as citizens,” meaning that they will behave a certain way (in accord with the wider society’s laws) and thus be treated a certain way (vested in the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship).¹³

Drew Ali’s narrative of history did not merely place the blame for slavery on some past catastrophe of disobedience or on ongoing affiliation with Christianity. Rather, the “state of mind” he mentions in the above quote is contrasted, repeatedly, with that mindset imposed upon Moors by slavery and reinforced by the ongoing legacy of racism, a mindset emphasized on the level of unconscious language use, most notably names. Moors have been kept blind to their true identity by the imposition of racist language onto them, language Moors themselves eventually

So, I, the Prophet, am hereby calling aloud with a Divine plea to all true American citizens to help me to remove this great sin which has been committed and is being practiced by my people in the United States of America, because they know it is not the true and Divine way and without understanding they have fallen from the true light into utter darkness of sin, and there is not a nation on earth today that will recognize them socially, religiously, politically or economically, etc. in their present condition of their endeavorment in which they themselves try to force upon a civilized world, they will not refrain from their sinful ways of action and their deeds have brought jim-crowism, segregation, and everything that brings harm to human beings on earth.

Drew Ali, “A Warning from the Prophet in 1928.”

12 Moreover, slavery is presented as a universal aspect of human—not merely Moorish—history: “through sin and disobedience every nation has suffered slavery, due to the fact that they honored not the creed and principles of their forefathers.” Drew Ali, *Holy Koran*, 131.

13 Drew Ali, “A Warning from the Prophet in 1928.”

adopted. “You are neither Negro, black, or colored,” Drew Ali wrote. Those who accept such labels have been brainwashed. Those who believe themselves to be “black” or “Negro” behave as racist white society expects “blacks” and “Negroes” to behave. It is each individual’s responsibility to uplift him or herself, beginning with a change in discourse. This dichotomy of “Moor” and “Negro” as markers of mindset and behavior continues to dominate Moorish Science rhetoric. One contemporary sermon, turning to the history of the Moors in America, argues “the first generation was *stripped* of their nationality and the words Negro and black were placed upon them . . . and they took on certain characteristics that were not theirs . . . They were being fraudulent. Do not act like a black person; do not act like a Negro. *Be* a Moorish American.”¹⁴

To be Moorish, for the first generation of Drew Ali’s followers, meant behaving in new ways, ways that were suddenly possible in, made sense in, and were rewarded in northern cities. Voting, in Drew Ali’s writings, becomes one of the foremost marks of Moorish behavior, along with industriousness, self-respect, and attention to hygiene and presentation. Drew Ali writes, “Anytime a man or a woman fails or refuses to cast a sacred ballot at the polls,” anytime they refuse the “rights of an American citizen,” they become subject to “Political Slavery.” In short, they become “Negroes” again, rather than owning up to their “divine birthright” as Moors.¹⁵ This emphasis on voting coincided with Mayor Thompson’s push for votes in the predominantly black second ward, his Republican Party’s alignment with leading African American politicians including Louis Anderson and Oscar De Priest, and the Republican machine’s reward of African American ward bosses and community organizers with Chicago-style patronage in public jobs such as postal work. Drew Ali, new to the city, courted Republican Party candidates, inviting them to photo ops and endorsing them in the pages of his Moorish newspaper, *The Moorish Guide*.¹⁶ The history of early Moorish Science is very much the story of a man attempting to advance the profile of his organization through city politics. As he declared in one press release, “All Registering,” “three thousand Moslems . . . are making ready to register every Man or Woman in order to take the lead for the various candidates whom they have been instructed to vote for,” including Anderson and De Priest and the wider “regular Republican Organization.”¹⁷ As contemporary Moorish pro-voting thinker Azeem Hopkins-Bey puts it, this “was what we’d call today a voting bloc.”¹⁸

Fragmentation of the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Scriptural Roots of Sovereign Theories

By the time Drew Ali died in 1929 (of natural causes, according to the coroner’s report, though various Moors have advanced other theories, including complications from a police beating), the movement was already in the process of fragmenting. The loss of the founding charismatic figure led to an all-out schism, with three major factions competing for use of the mantle of the prophet

14 Azeem Hopkins-Bey, “What Makes One a Moorish American?” *Know Thyself Radio*, podcast audio, October 18, 2010, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/themoorium/2010/10/18/what-makes-one-a-moorish-american>.

15 Drew Ali, “Political Slavery,” *Moorish Guide*, February 15, 1929, Moorish Science Temple Papers, 1926–1967 (box 1, folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City.

16 “Elect Anderson’—Prophet,” reads the headline of the February 1, 1929, *Moorish Guide*, instructing readers to vote for Louis Anderson for Second Ward alderman and Oscar De Priest for Congress. Moorish Science Temple Papers, 1926–1967 (box 1, folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City.

17 Drew Ali, “All Registering,” *Moorish Guide*, October 26, 1928, Moorish Science Temple Papers, 1926–1967 (box 1, folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City.

18 Hopkins-Bey, “What Makes One a Moorish American?”

and the title Moorish Science Temple of America. One result has been confusion for outside observers, from academics to law enforcement professionals. The Moorish Science group studied by Arthur Fauset in the 1940s, for instance, for his groundbreaking *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, were members of a splinter group following one of the men who claimed to be Drew Ali “reincarnated.”¹⁹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation, seeking out Moors who refused to register with the Selective Service System during World War II, repeatedly interviewed those in the resolutely patriotic group led by a migrant to Chicago named C. Kirkman Bey. It is important to note that since 1929 there has been no single “Moorish Science Temple of America.” While it is an old saw in religious studies that no religion is monolithic, in the Moorish Science case the fragmentation is divisive enough to lead to multiple private battles and public lawsuits over the use of variations of the Moorish Science Temple name.²⁰

Drew Ali’s death led to a crisis in leadership, as is often the case in religious movements, but in the case of Moorish Science the prophet’s statements then also lent themselves to diverse interpretations. Drew Ali’s written oeuvre, from the *Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America* to assorted shorter articles, essays, and addresses canonized as scripture in the Moorish literature, are often ambiguous at best in their employ of key terms such as “nation” and “nationality.” While some behaviors of Moorish groups can be seen as innovations derived from sources outside the Moorish scriptural canon—such as the taboo on alcohol and meat observed by the Philadelphia group that Fauset studied—divisions regarding participation in or rejecting the authority of local and federal government are linked back to interpretations of Drew Ali’s own words. The divide between those Moors who continue to be law-abiding and those who engage in interpretations and actions best classified as sovereign draw their authority from the same writings—and often from the same passages. Consider, for instance, this statement from Drew Ali:

Those who fail to recognize the free National name of their Constitutional Government are classed as undesirable and are subject to all inferior names, abused, and mistreatment that the citizens care to bestow upon them and it is a sin for any group of people to violate the National Constitutional Laws of a free National Government and to cling to the names and principals that delude to slavery.²¹

For some Moors, this passage is interpreted to mean that declaration of oneself as a Moorish American (rather than a Negro or a black), guarantees full citizenship in the United States. Therefore, one must abide by the laws of the United States and refuse the titles and behaviors associated with the oppressed black past in order to avoid the contemporary slave-like state of subjugation and oppression. “The names and principals that delude to slavery” are terms such as Negro and black and the mindsets—the delusions, to parse Drew Ali’s pun—associated with those racist terms. Azeem Hopkins-Bey offers a lengthy, detailed, line-by-line explication of this passage, coming to the ultimate conclusion that “the free national name aforementioned here refers to your nationality. You are recognized as an American citizen due to your Moorish-American identity.”²² An anonymous writer for the “Moorish American News” website echoes this interpretation, phrasing it in (American) Constitutional terms:

19 Arthur Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 41–51. See also, Robert B. Vale, “Islam Calls in Lombard St.,” *Philadelphia Sunday News*, October 21, 1934, which details how “thousands” flock to see the “Chicago mystic” who proclaimed himself as a reincarnation of both Muhammad and Drew Ali.

20 See *El Bey v. Moorish Science Temple of America, Inc.*, 765 A.2d 132 (Md. 2001).

21 Drew Ali, “A Warning from the Prophet in 1928.” The peculiarities of language use are Drew Ali’s.

Our Free national name and standards give us divine rights unmolested by other citizens. Under our free national standards we can cast a free national ballot at election polls under the free national constitution of the States Government and not under the granted privileges of the 14th and 15th amendments as has been the case for many generations. With our Moorish American unity we can back those candidates who have our best interest at heart.²³

A recent cover story in the same publication, “Why We Moors MUST Rock the Vote,” also addressed the issue.²⁴ The Azeem Hopkins-Bey piece was published on a website run by Sharif A. Bey’s Operation Proclamation/The Act 6 Movement “a nation-wide call to Moorish American political unity” which sees its major objective as the fulfillment of Noble Drew Ali’s plan for “A CONCENTRATED POLITICAL BODY, ACTING/MOVING AS A SINGULAR PERSON (ie, FREE NATIONAL BALLOT), [as] the ONLY way to effectively address our unique issues in a real and meaningful way.” The movement’s homepage quotes the prophet as saying that Moors “MUST depend upon for their earthly salvation as AMERICAN CITIZENS,” interpreting salvation to mean liberation from oppression in the here-and-now and thus possible only through organized and informed participation in the democratic process.²⁵

Sovereign interpretations stand in direct conflict with such readings. To quote one recent and blunt formulation: “Sovereign Moorish Nationals are not bound by any city, county, state, federal, criminal or civil laws of the land.”²⁶ For this sovereign Moorish thinker, Titus King Connally-Bey, “Sovereignty” is that legal condition which results from “Declaring” one’s “Free National Name.” For such purposes, Connally-Bey includes a legal form at the end of his book, ready to be “exercised, affirmed, certified, and invoked” with a series of signatures on the blanks provided.²⁷

While Sharif A. Bey calls such interpretation “outright condemnations of core tenets of the MSTA teachings,”²⁸ both sides draw on the same language and the same texts. Sharif A. Bey’s promoting “Operation Proclamation” is rooted in a reading of Article 6 of Noble Drew Ali’s “Divine Constitution and By-Laws,” the earliest governance document of the Moorish Science Temple of America. Likewise, Connally-Bey, in his “Declaration of Free National name” form, cites the exact same Article: “With us all members must proclaim their nationality and we are teaching our people their nationality and Divine Creed that they may know that they are a part and a partial of this said government.” Again, the crux is interpretation: “this said government” means, for

22 Azeem Hopkins-Bey, “What is Our ‘Free National Name’?,” *Operation Proclamation*, March 11, 2013, <http://operationproclamation.org/subject-of-exposition-free-national-name.html>.

23 Moorish America, “We Are All One Family Bearing One Free National Name,” *Moorish American News*, December 24, 2013, <http://moorishamericannews.com/we-are-all-one-family-bearing-one-free-national-name#sthash.Mke8GJHg.dpbs>.

24 Mahdi McCoy, “Why We Moors MUST Rock the Vote,” *Moorish American News*, September 16, 2014, <http://moorishamericannews.com/moors-must-rock-vote#sthash.HyyO5jgp.dpuf>.

25 Consider this retelling of history: “NOBLE DREW ALI ORGANIZED 100,000 PEOPLE IN 15 STATES, AND HAD 10,000 IN THE CITY OF CHICAGO ALONE. A concentrated vote is ultimate power politically, and OPERATION PROCLAMATION is the movement to duplicate Noble Drew Ali’s civic agenda for the first time in 84 years.” *Operation Proclamation*, <http://operationproclamation.org/> (site discontinued). An archived version of the site containing the quoted material from January 11, 2016, is available through the Internet Archive at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160111205409/http://operationproclamation.org/>.

26 T. King Connally-Bey, “The Moorish Perpetual Union,” in *Enter NationalNomics (The King-Dom of Divine Free-Dom): The Moorish Code; Enter NationalNomics—The Moorish Zodiac Constitution, The Great Seal* (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2014), 19.

27 *Ibid.*, 32.

28 Sharif A. Bey, *The Blueprint: Moorish Musings on Noble Drew Ali’s Divine Plan of the Age* (DeWitt: Ali’s Men Publishing, n.d.) (This source is not paginated.).

Sharif A. Bey and other law-abiding Moors, the American government; for Connally-Bey “this said government” is that separate and sovereign government first established by Drew Ali’s Divine Constitution (and later adapted into subsequent Constitutions, including one published by Connally-Bey himself).²⁹ As one of several “Moorish American Governments” explains it, “Noble Drew Ali introduced The Divine Constitution . . . the world’s 2nd shortest amass of constitutional laws of any government on earth to date, save the United States. Our Divine Constitution is the supreme natural laws empowering the Moorish American People as an independent and sovereign nation.”³⁰

In the wake of the charismatic founding figure, Noble Drew Ali, Moors turned to his scriptural legacy and encountered, therein, textual ambiguity which could be interpreted along divergent lines: resolutely in favor of American citizenship as the sole path to “salvation” or declaring a radical break with America and establishing a new sovereign government. Moorish identity thus came to mean, as early as 1929, either an affirmation of the rights and responsibilities of American democracy or an existence outside the jurisdiction of that legal and political system. For a movement that emphasized, from the start, “unity” and practical advice on legal and political behavior, this situation led to both rupture and exchange. Various contemporary Moors and Moorish groups, for instance, actively debate each other’s claims, not only to authenticity in regard to Moorish identity and the use of such titles as Moorish Science Temple of America, but also in terms of hermeneutic strategies, legal tactics, historical narratives, and means of publicizing their assertions and the relation of their claims to the real world. I will detail some lines of sovereign logic and behavior, but it is important to note that Moorish communities, far from existing in isolation from each other, are constantly interacting—contesting, questioning, rebutting, reinterpreting, and selectively borrowing from each other.

The search for “real” and “correct” Moorish Science is a dominant theme in contemporary Moorish discourse, across the spectrum of interpretations. Consider, for instance, the following exchange in the comments section of Azeem Hopkins-Bey’s aforementioned explication of the meaning of “free national name” on the website run by the pro-voting Operation Proclamation. A visitor identifying as Chris writes: “About citizenship. I’m confused.” He then goes on to quote an interpretation of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, writing that this decision “declared that no one of African descent, imported or not, would ever be considered a CITIZEN of the U.S.” Chris goes on to say that he has been taught that such African-descended people were thus later “designated as 14th Amendment citizens” or “ARTIFICIAL PERSONS,” an interpretation he attributes to “the teachings of Elder Taj Tarik Bey.”³¹ Sharif A. Bey responds the following day with his own, contrasting interpretation of the *Dredd Scott* case: the decision is based on the “political classification” of Scott as a “NEGRO OF AFRICAN DESCENT,” which he calls “a culturally and politically ambiguous term, or ‘mark,’ that renders the recipient devoid of political standing or consideration.” He goes on to say that “Prophet Drew Ali taught us that a MAN cannot be a negro, and nothing but a man can obtain citizenship,” that nationality “cannot exist absent citizenship,” and that by

29 Connally-Bey reprints C. M. Bey’s “Zodiac Constitution.” A full text of C. M. Bey’s version is available at <http://moorishdirectory.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Zodiac-Constitution-by-CM-Bey.pdf>. This “Zodiac Constitution” was central in the arrest of one hundred New York City employees on tax evasion charges in 1997. See Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, photographs by Jolie Stahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 32.

30 Elijah N. Pleasant-Bey, “The Divine Constitution of Moorish America (defined),” n.d., <http://moorishamerican.gov.org/TheDivineConstitutionExplained.pdf>.

31 Chris, March 12, 2013 (4:14 a.m.), comment on Azeem Hopkins-Bey, “Subject of Exposition: ‘Free National Name’?”, *Operation Proclamation*, March 11, 2013, <http://operationproclamation.org/subject-of-exposition-free-national-name.html>.

rejecting the mark of “Negro” and proclaiming one’s national identity as Moorish American one is, in fact, a citizen of the United States.³²

Here we have an example of three dominant themes within contemporary Moorish discourse: an engagement in historical legal texts, a recourse to etymology, and an emphasis on the practical ramifications of claims. In sovereign circles, moreover, we see specific sacred historical narratives (this notion of the Fourteenth Amendment vesting Moors with an “artificial citizen” or “straw man” status), strategic use of etymological research to authorize claims (typically involving multiple dictionaries and multiple, especially older editions of these dictionaries), and a focus not only on instructing Moors in behavior with practical legal efficacy but also publicizing examples of victorious encounters (encounters presented as proving the truth as well as the effectiveness of sovereign teachings).

CLAIMS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SOVEREIGN MOORISH LEGAL DISCOURSE

“An Artificial Entity”: Bandle El-Amin’s Moorish Republic of New Kemet and Sacred Historical Narratives of Straw Men and the Fourteenth Amendment

Bandle El-Amin is a major figure in contemporary sovereign Moorish discourse. A prolific author and the head of an organization called the Moorish Republic of New Kemet, El-Amin offers workshops on identity, history, and sovereign legal tactics in the Dayton, Ohio, area and, through various websites and assorted books, reaches out in an attempt to educate a wide range of sovereign African Americans, not merely fellow Moors. El-Amin’s project is twofold, at once legal and pedagogical, invested in practical tactics for negotiating the law and a general uplift via culture and morale. He phrases his first “objective” as “to create a basis for Blacks to change their status in U.S. law,” which involves, among other things, release from prison of “many prisoners . . . due to lack of jurisdiction or defect in convictions. Learn Constitutional rights to represent in *Propia Persona*.”³³ His “second objective is restoring Blacks to the human race with a re-education process. This process consists of culture (history, religion, language and politics), which are missing keys in Black’s psyche.”³⁴

El-Amin bases his legal theories in a narrative of sacred history, a religious story of catastrophe akin to—and surely influenced by—other sovereign citizen narratives.³⁵ El-Amin combines two plot lines with echoes in various sovereign and conspiracy theories. In his telling, the Constitution was revoked by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, never to be reinstated, but it was also (again?) revoked during the Franklin Roosevelt administration (either by Roosevelt or by certain elite bankers/the Illuminati) as a response to the Stock Market crash and the start of World War II. This dual historical narrative allows El-Amin to emphasize the 14th Amendment as a source of legal

32 Sarif Anael Bey, March 13, 2013 (1:34 p.m.), comment on Azeem Hopkins-Bey, “What is Our ‘Free National Name’?”, *Operation Proclamation*, March 11, 2013, <http://operationproclamation.org/subject-of-exposition-free-national-name.html>.

33 Bandle El Amin, *Nationality, Birthrights, and Jurisprudence: New Social & Cultural Blueprint for Melaninated Indigenous People* (n.p.: printed by author, 2014), 29. El-Amin’s name is not consistently hyphenated in his publications. Citations use the form indicated by the title page of the work cited.

34 *Ibid.*, 30.

35 Compare, for instance, similar historical narratives in sovereign texts such as David E. Robinson, *Reclaiming Your Sovereignty: Take Back Your Christian Name* (n.p.: printed by author, 2009) and Robert Hart, *Citizen/Slave: Understanding the American Sovereign Spirit* (Pittsburgh: Rose Dog Books, 2005).

problems for citizens while also explaining the discrepancy between the historical reality of Drew Ali's urging Moors to obey the laws of the land and El-Amin's contemporary, sovereign teachings. According to El-Amin, the role of laws—indeed, the legality of the ruling system—changed after the death of Drew Ali. While the prophet “*instructed (the Moors) to go by, and obey, the laws of the federal, state, and county governments,*” he did so because in the 1920s, according to El-Amin, “*the individual states of the United States of America, were Sovereign.*”³⁶ In El-Amin's telling, Drew Ali chose death in order to continue his struggle for the uplift of the Moorish people as a spirit, presumably out of prescient knowledge of the political and financial trauma that was to come. The Stock Market crash and Great Depression, El-Amin argues, allowed the Illuminati, with their Federal Reserve Bank, to strip sovereignty from the states and set up a new government, the “Corporate United States of America” serving “*the elite few*” at the expense of the masses. The Constitution was revoked and “*perpetual Maritime Law ... went into effect in 1933*” when Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress for “The War Powers.”³⁷

While El-Amin gestures at more widely held conspiracy theories (the mention, above, of the Illuminati, for instance, which is the only reference to that group in his book, or his parenthetical flagging of President Roosevelt as “*a Master Mason*”) the precise villains and their rationale remain vague in El-Amin's drama.³⁸ What he makes clear, however, is that the Constitution, after 1933, was no longer recognized by government or the courts; instead “color-of-law” and “private law” went into effect. In his words, “*These acts, in effect, were designed to neutralize the sovereignty of the ‘Natural Person’ and to steal the birthrights-protections of the Natural People, which were secured by the ‘Supreme Law of the Land’—being the Constitution.*”³⁹ In the wake of 1933, then, the rights and responsibilities of which Drew Ali spoke were illegally and unjustly stripped away; Moors (and other citizens) existed in an oppressive and illegal situation—in opposition to the US Constitution and the divine or natural law on which that document was based. El-Amin's earlier historical narrative is largely parallel to this one. He claims that when the states of the Confederacy seceded from the Union, “The Republic form of Government ... ceased to exist.” Thus, since April 1861 “there has been no ‘de jure’ (sanctioned by law) Congress and no authentic federal government. Everything functions under ‘color of law’ (the appearance or semblance, without substance, of legal right). Through Executive Orders under authority of the War Powers, (i.e. emergency, i.e. the law of necessity) the ‘law of necessity’ means no law whatsoever.”⁴⁰ Why Roosevelt would need to repeat these steps is unclear, but El-Amin needs this double-pronged explanation in order to explain not merely why citizens have been stripped of their rights, but also that a false or “artificial person-corporate entity-franchise entitled ‘citizen of the United States’” has been created for everyone born in this country. As El-Amin reads the “so-called (fraudulent and unratified) Fourteenth Amendment,” this is an act created to resolve war debt, offering over to what he calls “the Bankers” “corporate entities that are legally subject to the jurisdiction which they exist.”⁴¹

Far from vesting African Americans in full citizenship, then, the Fourteenth Amendment, in this dystopic sacred historical reading, represents a new, more complex and nefarious, form of slavery: financial slavery to the corporation masking as a state. People born in America have their freedom

36 El Amin, *Nationality*, 45 (In this and following citations to El Amin, italics are original unless otherwise noted.).

37 *Ibid.*, 49.

38 *Ibid.*, 47.

39 *Ibid.*, 48.

40 El Amin, *Moors*, 48.

41 *Ibid.*, 48–49.

stripped from them with the issuance of legal documents, beginning with the birth certificate. The birth certificate is proof of “corporate status” rather than free national or sovereign natural status. Evidence of this claim, El-Amin teaches, can be found in the way the name is written on official documents. Birth certificates, for instance, refer not to individuals but to the “artificial person” or “straw man” created as a slave to the bankers:

The straw man was created by law shortly after you were born via the registration of the application for your birth certificate. The name for the straw man is your name in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. You will notice that the inscription on the birth certificate is your name in all-capital letters. The English language has precise rules of grammar that make no provision for writing proper nouns in all-capital letters. So, your name spelled with all-capital letters is a fictitious name. Your straw man has a same-sounding name as your name, but is an artificial entity which exists only “by force of or in contemplation of law.” The all-caps name is not your “true name” which consists of the given name plus the surname (family name), and appears with only initial letters capitalized. The all-caps version of your name is a TRADE NAME, the name under which you “do business.”⁴²

El-Amin’s elaborate narrative of history sets up a series of specific problems that his project of legal intervention and education then seeks to solve. In a country in which the Congress is illegal, the Constitution suspended, the Republic nonexistent, and citizens reduced to slaves serving unjust and avaricious elites, the religious notion of “salvation” becomes first and foremost a legal struggle.

At the start of one of his several recent books, El-Amin declares the text’s goal to be “to assist so called Black people in correcting their Nationality and status on the record in the US. The nationality focused on is our indigenous and Moorish/Muurish status.”⁴³ The “process of naturalization” outlined by El-Amin involves two steps. First, he urges his audience to change their names (to engage in the “correction” of this “attribute” of identity, to use his terms). This step “is vital to linking you to your nobility,” though it is the second step that carries legal efficacy. That second step is the creation of paperwork that must be “filed and used for recognition of your legal status.”⁴⁴ These two steps require two different types of documents. The first involves a “Proclamation of Nationality and Birthright,” which is “similar to a Baptismal that Christian’s use,” in that it notes indigenous name and “spiritual creed.” This, in El-Amin’s description, is primarily symbolic. The second type of document, however, is a “Declaration of Nationality” which is of legal use for “[r]ight to travel, proclaiming indigenous/Moorish status, dual citizenship, Jurisdiction, Positive identification, and domicile.”⁴⁵ This document is the first step in the larger process and practice of “Renunciation of corporate U.S. status.”⁴⁶

Rejection of corporate status, for El-Amin, plays out through specific actions one does (or refuses to do) in daily life as well as specific actions one does (or refuses to do) when confronted with police officers or other authorities from the legal system. Thus, while El-Amin gives advice to avoid getting married with a marriage license (this makes you “a slave” of the state)⁴⁷ and includes both the phone number for and a transcript of his own conversation with a customer service representative of the Social Security Administration, from when he called to inquire about the process for

42 Ibid., 51.

43 Ibid., 4.

44 Ibid., 52–53.

45 Ibid., 53.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 71.

terminating his number,⁴⁸ El-Amin also offers guidance for what to do when one is “charged with a crime.”⁴⁹

The only specific criminal charge El-Amin prepares his audience for dealing with is one that he also prepares them to commit. His insistence (in keeping with broader sovereign citizen claims) that there is a distinction between being a “traveler” and a “driver” (that the latter implies payment for the service of driving) allows him to argue that “you should not have to be subject to any licensing laws, with the exception for Truck Drivers or Delivery Drivers that are employed under commercial law travel,” as a private traveler does not require a license.⁵⁰ Thus, when stopped by police at a traffic stop, El-Amin instructs his readers to “give them your insurance card and your Moorish I.D. card. Remind the officer that you are under international law.”⁵¹ Should this fail to convince and a citation be forthcoming, El-Amin advises the following:

- “[F]ile your nationality documents along with whatever motions/affidavits you are using.”
- Refuse representation from an attorney: “represent yourself.”
- Be wary (though he does not spell this out clearly) about “appearing” in court, which he says, submits you “to their jurisdiction. You should ‘Appear’ Specially and not generally. The key is jurisdiction and status.”
- In dealing with your case, “Certain motions will assist you in court.”
- Always “request a continuance. This will allow you more time to prepare your case. You also need to request a discovery packet.”
- “If there were any reason to doubt probably cause, you should file a motion to suppress.”
- “If a motion is denied by the judge, you can appeal that motion.”
- “Never make a plea. Always let the judge make a plea on your behalf.”⁵²

I noted above that El-Amin’s project also includes a component of education into culture and identity. Indeed, he frames the mission of the Moorish Republic of New Kemit organization in the following manner: “to practice and teach African centered philosophy, thought and ritual . . . to educate Blacks of their Moorish/African heritage,” but while there is emphasis on traditional African culture, cuisine, and healing, El-Amin’s primary focus is clearly to help people “understand law and how to retain their human (sovereign/constitutional) rights through nationality.”⁵³ El-Amin ran multi-week seminars for teaching those in the Dayton, Ohio, area to become what he calls “first rate” or “first class citizens.” He reports that one recent session consisted of two groups: one that began with forty students, of which thirty-two “remained throughout the entire course”; and another that began with twenty-five students, of which fifteen remained.⁵⁴ Although these seminars tested participants’ knowledge of specific African-derived terms and

48 Ibid., 57.

49 Ibid., 72.

50 El Amin, *Nationality*, 60. El-Amin cites the 1914 edition of *Bowvier’s Law Dictionary* to draw a contradistinction between the term “traveler” and “driver,” defined as “One employed in conducting a coach, carriage, wagon, or other vehicle,” and which El-Amin glosses as emphasizing “one who is ‘employed’ in conducting a vehicle. It should be self-evidence that this person could not be ‘travelling’ on a journey, but is using the road as a place of business.” El Amin, *Moors*, 65; *Bowvier’s Law Dictionary and Concise Encyclopedia*, 8th ed., s.v. “traveler”; Ibid., “driver.”

51 El Amin, *Moors*, 63.

52 Ibid., 72–73.

53 El Amin, *Nationality*, 15.

54 Ibid., 117.

historical trivia, El-Amin considered the most important assessment of student learning to be “a ‘hands on’ observation of subject groups in real life scenarios.”⁵⁵ This course component, which El-Amin calls the “*actual test*,” displays the subject’s ability to interact in society with results. An example is how to talk to a police officer at a traffic stop. How you let a police officer know your rights as a Moorish American? The tone of voice and response must be acceptable by the instructor. A Mock trial or simulation court trial may be created to test the student’s skills in law, orating and attitude.”⁵⁶

El-Amin’s focus on the real-world application of his teaching is consistent with his conception of this “knowledge of law” as having practical value. Such performances, moreover, are necessary marks of Moorish identity; to be able to handle oneself in street encounters with police officers and in courtroom confrontations with judges is a mark of having come into true consciousness of one’s identity and rights.

*“You Must Know the Truth of Your Nationality and the Name of Your People”:
Etymology as Authority across the Spectrum of Moorish Interpretations of Nationality,
from Operation Proclamation’s Sharif A. Bey to Sovereign Theorist Taj Tarik Bey*

When, in the 1920s, Noble Drew Ali taught that “You must know the truth of your nationality and the name of your people,” he was arguing that terms such as “black,” “negro,” and “colored” were incorrect appellations, labels foisted upon unconscious Moorish-Americans as a way to insure that they remain “unconscious” of their true identity, responsibility, and potential.⁵⁷ Drew Ali’s understanding of American racism is expressed, here, as at once ubiquitously present in and normalized through language. Racist labels have the effect of reinforcing oppression on the level of image (held by self and other), and even (maybe especially) unconsciously. To call oneself a negro is to consent to the meaning given to that term by those in power, those who call one a negro. On a conscious level, if one believes that one is a negro, a concept defined by racists, then one is not only trapped legally (i.e., a negro is not a citizen), but also in terms of thought and behavior (i.e., to believe that negro defines one’s identity, to behave *like a negro*, is to think and live in opposition to the worldview and behavior of a Moor). Ali points to the power of language as a means of oppression while, at the same time, alerting his audience to language’s radically liberating potential. By using different words, Drew Ali teaches, individuals can begin to break out of the mindset of the dominant racist society. This is a tactic that would rise to national attention in a group that developed out of Moorish Science teaching, the Nation of Islam, when “slave names” were replaced, not only with original, African names, but most notably with the iconic X, a cipher for the slave industry’s erasure of black Americans’ connection to and knowledge of their African heritage and history. Instead of going by the name of the family that used to own your ancestors, you remake yourself with the mark of history’s erasure: the name becomes weaponized. Drew Ali was teaching this years before the Nation of Islam began: “Negro” is racist society’s last line of defense against Moorish consciousness. Reject the term, embrace your true national name—“El” or “Bey” in early Moorish science—and break free from “mental slavery.”⁵⁸

Contemporary Moorish thinkers—across the spectrum of interpretations on nationality, from pro-voting to sovereign—take Drew Ali’s emphasis on language farther, sharing a belief in an objective

55 Ibid., 114.

56 Ibid.

57 Drew Ali, “Nick Named.”

58 Drew Ali, “So This Is Chicago,” *Moorish Guide*, October 26, 1928, Moorish Science Temple Papers, 1926–1967 (box 1, folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City.

truth under the socially contingent delusions of terminology. In short, the science of etymology is valorized as a means of obtaining the true and thus efficacious meaning of a given word. One result of this is strategic employ of an eclectic array of dictionaries and claims about language, its development, and meaning.

Consider, for instance, pro-voting Operation Proclamation founder Sharif A. Bey's introduction to legal logic in one of his books. "Therefore, when a Man calls him or herself a 'human being,'" he writes, "they are saying, 'I'm an animal; I'm non-religious; I'm unrepentant; I'm wicked, sinful and dissolute; I'm subject to carnal nature's law, rather than Allah's Law.'" ⁵⁹ He comes to this "definition" via an etymological examination of terms. People act a certain way, morally—so this logic goes—because they are under the incorrect assumption that they are accurately described by a certain term. Terminology determines ontology—even if the aforementioned "human being" does not *realize* the "true" meaning of the term he or she uses to describe him or herself.

Sharif A. Bey gets from "human being" to "non-religious ... unrepentant ... sinful ... carnal," through recourse to dictionaries. The employ of such texts is selective. He first turns to "Ballentine's Law Dictionary, 1948 Edition," where he finds that "'Human Being' is defined as follows: 'See monster'. From the same dictionary, 'monster' is defined: 'A human-being by birth, but in some part resembling a lower animal.'" To learn more, A. Bey turns to yet another dictionary, "Oxford New English Dictionary of 1901," wherein "'human' is defined as '3. Belonging or relative to man as distinguished from God or superhuman beings; pertaining to the sphere or faculties of man (with implication of limitation or inferiority); mundane; secular. (Often opposed to divine).' . . . Thus, 'human' means ungodly." ⁶⁰ A. Bey's move is *scientific*—following Noble Drew Ali's association of science with his religion—Moorish Science, or Islamism. ⁶¹ This "scientific" move is perceived to be and presented as objective, speaking to true identity (the reality of the thing as revealed via the understanding of its actual name) as well as revealing a truth of practical use value in the world. Knowledge of the meaning of words, their definitions, is no mere trivial knowledge. A. Bey argues; rather, such knowledge is potentially efficacious in that arena wherein words most obviously have real effects: the legal.

Moorish thinker Taj Tarik Bey—one of the elder statesmen of sovereign Moorish discourse, a prolific author and prominent presence on the Internet—follows a similar logic, explaining the etymology of the term "black":

All scholars know that black is an English word, it's in 14th century, medieval period. It is no older than 500 years old. . . . It actually means pale. . . . It's just one of the brands that the Europeans put on us, and we bought into it, that's all. And it doesn't mean we weren't called that. *But it doesn't make that who you are.* ⁶²

Europeans "branded us" with names to "remove us from that [legal] status," Tarik Bey argues. ⁶³ The result of this branding was and is a widespread confusion and, worse, an emotional attachment to confused identity and terminology, such that people insist on being proud of being black, and talk of "black culture," which Tarik Bey explains as meaning, simply, "dead culture." ⁶⁴ Tarik Bey is quick to emphasize that this discussion of terminology is not merely academic: words matter in the real world, most immediately and especially, in the realm of law.

⁵⁹ A. Bey, *The Blueprint*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ And following, as well, Drew Ali's famous statement in his *Holy Koran* that one popular term for Moorish-Americans, "black," "according to science means death."

⁶² "Taj Tarik Bey Black and White Is a Legal Status," YouTube video, 10:24, posted by "SaneterTV7," March 1, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du_XmBL662Q.

⁶³ Ibid. 4:58.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 2:20.

In law, one must name things correctly. As Tarik Bey cracks, “In law, if I’m selling you a pit bull, and the pit bull goes meow, that’s a violation.”⁶⁵ More seriously, in one of his many passionate acts of evangelism and teaching recorded on YouTube, he challenges a young man with what he claims is the first and most important question, the question that will determine whether any future conversation can take place: “Do you know etymology?”⁶⁶

Without a shared understanding of the true meaning of language, communication is impossible. Etymology, for Tarik Bey, is the foundation for all conversation, “the science that treats of the origin, the root, the nature, and the spirit of the words.”⁶⁷ Such a science is universal and, indeed, invented by Africans, though today Europeans use it as a tool of oppression. To be precise, Tarik Bey holds that “the language that we usually use is called connotative linguistics, which is introduced into societies where people are held in servitude so that their own language traps them.”⁶⁸ Lack of knowledge of etymology “will cause failures In law and in standings and in contract, you would fail all the time, which makes us incompetent.”⁶⁹

Legal expertise is valued in, and understanding of terminology as key to such expertise is recognized by, Moors and Moorish communities universally, across divides of factionalism, debates of lineage and theology, or the spectrum of interpretation regarding nationality and citizenship. The sources of “truth” in relation to words, however, are not agreed upon. At times, among some thinkers, this is explicitly recognized and even—as for Taj Tarik Bey—a perennial source of frustration. “Truth,” a Moorish National website reminds us, is defined by Black’s Law Dictionary 4th Edition Revised as the “Agreement of thought and reality,” but in practice, such an agreement is fluid, allowing for creative claims to be backed by the authority of seemingly objective, “scientific” etymological interpretations.⁷⁰ All that is required is recourse to a dictionary.

The dictionary, offering definitions and, in some cases, etymology, provides the Moorish thinker with an invaluable resource. Which dictionary or dictionaries are consulted becomes an important question for sovereign theorists, who often insist upon specific dictionaries. Sometimes choice of dictionary has a clear practical purpose, as when Sharif A. Bey wove together citations from two older edition dictionaries in order to bolster his line of thought. El-Amin tells his readers that, as part of their journey toward freedom, the “First thing is to purchase a Black’s Law Dictionary.”⁷¹ Because of its name, there are debates in Moorish communities as to whether this dictionary is intended for or part of the racist oppression of Moors, but when it is used, it is often older editions, the antiquated definitions of which prove more amenable to certain interpretations. One online thinker argues that any edition past the fifth edition is invalid: “The reasons why is the definitions change and, in some instances, the definitions are incomplete,” though his interest is particularly in words like “driver,” the older definitions of which are more easily read as not applying to “travelers” piloting motor vehicles down free roads.⁷²

65 Ibid., 3:14.

66 “Taj Tariq Bey on the Battlefield,” YouTube video, 5:59, posted by “BLACKNEW102,” October 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5yGoE78YBo>.

67 Ibid., 10:18.

68 Ibid., 11:06.

69 Ibid., 14:24.

70 “Pictures of Our Moorish Supreme Court of Equity and Truth,” *Moor News* (blog), *Moorish Science Temple*, November 9, 2012, http://moorishamericannationalrepublic.com/news_categories/moor-news/page/9/.

71 El Amin, *Moors*, 72.

72 “Black’s Law Dictionary 5th Edition,” YouTube video, 0:29, posted by “Tacticalguy1,” November 19, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgzLtssgsPM>. Fellow travelers follow similar tactics, like Randy Stroud of <http://sovereigntactics.org/>. Stroud is a white sovereign who also relies on the fourth edition of *Black’s Law*

Thought such as this has been borrowed from and is shared with other sovereign groups. Distinctive to Moorish Science, however, is this dynamic by which the priority given to terminology allows for radical interpretive creativity, ranging from a focus on Oxford English Dictionary etymology represented by Taj Tarik Bey, who cautions that one must know the etymon of all words, and recommends the Oxford English Dictionary,

because all scholars around the world, they have all dictionaries, but they always have Oxford ... because Oxford is always going to the etymon ... [s]cholars know these things, which is why they have secret societies[;]⁷³

to the popular riffing on sounds and associations and numerological significance represented by, say, Brother Eric Mungin Bey's book, *Discover the Key to the Moorish Questionary*;⁷⁴ or the sort of analysis of idioms and claim to comparative (but free-form) "etymological research" performed by Amen A. El in his *The Passion and Resurrection of the Moorish Hiram*.⁷⁵ Words

Dictionary alongside the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*. He is interested in both "common definition and ... legal definition" of any given word, though he cautions, "Legalese is its own separate language from common adage." He provides another example, stating, "Right and license are antithetical to each other," if you consider their legal meanings. He insists "Are you a driver? Do you drive? I'm a traveler, not a driver," because "driver" includes the notion of "employment" in the fourth edition of *Black's Law Dictionary*. As a sovereign, Stroud argues that the United States is a corporation. As an exegete focused on the meaning of individual terms, he looks up words he associates with formative—scriptural?—texts—such as the Declaration of Independence. For example he defines "consent" as "[v]oluntary compliance" with government. Such work of words can produce shocking results: "Let's look up what a monster is," he says, but he pushes deeper into the definition to find the strand he needs. A monster cannot inherit land, "In reality none of us can inherit any land" because "[m]ost people pay property taxes," which means "most people are inadvertently subject to being a monster." Randy Stroud, "Blacks Law: Lesson 1," YouTube video, 0:38–3:45, 7:08–9:00, posted by "General Zero," July 27, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rSgANcaess>.

- 73 "Taj Tariq Bey on the Battlefield," 11:26 and 13:47. Tarik Bey has his own notions of conspiracy and hegemony: "Masonry is Islam, the science," he says, and it is through the science of Islam that Europeans (so-called whites) rule the world, but what he shares with the majority of contemporary Moorish Science thinkers is this emphasis on etymology as revealing the forgotten or concealed truth of words. "Taj Tarik Bey Black and White Is a Legal Status," 8:02. While this is often negative—"black," for instance, as a brand, a tool for oppression—words can also reveal positive glimpses of the glorious Moorish past. For instance, he explains that "They call our children pickaninnies. You know why? Because we're the pics that ruled Europe," which is why the pope has a Moor in his coat of arms. "Our concepts are wrong: we are the druids!" "Taj Tarik Bey Black and White Is a Legal Status," 21:11. Not all Moors will agree about being druids or about the particular reading of "pickaninny," or the meaning of the presence of the Moor's head on the pope's coat of arms, but all Moors, I submit, will agree that "our concepts are wrong," as a whole, that the confusion of the present age—to which the prophet Noble Drew Ali came with the mission of correcting, of "uplifting a nation" by teaching them how to think—is rooted largely in the terms used and misused, applied and misapplied to themselves, others, and the wider society.
- 74 Eric Mungin Bey, *Discover the Key to the Moorish Questions: A Study Guide for All Moorish Americans* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2009). Mungin Bey takes scriptural texts and offers a glossary, amounting often to a word-by-word gloss (see page 15, on Drew Ali's pamphlet "The Great Meeting is On!," where Mungin Bey begins by defining "Great" and "Meeting," then moves on to key words in the text). Etymology of various forms gets employed here—indeed, perhaps exploding or at least setting wide the margins of the term—Mungin Bey speaks of "Nameology," which is not merely about meaning but also "sounds ... rhythms" and spiritual properties of names. More straightforward-seeming analysis of words proceed "according to the science of numerology" and "according to the science of letters": he decodes a word like "black" via its numerological significance (11) or the meanings of the letters ("B" or "Beth: being life or death") (see page 54).
- 75 Amen A. El, *The Passion and Resurrection of the Moorish Hiram: Or the Metaphysical Subjugation and Posthumous Emancipation of the So-Called Black Race* (Bloomington: Authorhouse Publishing, 2007). The word I am tempted to pin to this practice is *anarchic*; other Moorish thinkers are selective in reading out from

may be everything to Moorish Science, but they are fluid, shifting, easily claimed and contested. Taj Tarik Bey expresses his frustration: “if you don’t know etymology, what difference does it make what answer I give to you?”⁷⁶ But he also recognizes the root of the problem when he poses this question in more technical terms: “Are you going to give me a definition or a connotative opinion?”⁷⁷ This, lamentably, is the contemporary case: opinions hold the day. This is lamentable not only for the many Moors attempting to discern which path of Moorish Science is “right” and “true,” but also for those Moors who, in evincing their belief in sovereign claims, end up with multiple convictions, and ultimately, for the police officers, judges, and lawyers who must attempt to negotiate these sorts of claims. In the end, any opinion about a word, if proof texted by reference to a dictionary, can pass as legally competent.

THE MAGICAL, SUPERSESSIONIST NOMOS OF SOVEREIGN MOORISH KNOWLEDGE OF THE LAW

The Magical Efficacy and Plausibility of Sovereign Moorish Legal Nomos

Neither the specific meaning of words nor the specific authority needed to support a claim to meaning is set, yet sovereign Moorish logic is hardly a state of interpretive chaos. Likewise, with the words of Noble Drew Ali, meaning varies with the interpreter, but the authority of the source is assured. With etymology, sovereign Moors share a coherent system for researching and authorizing meaning, even if such meaning is, ultimately, subjective and individual, even within the broader sovereign Moorish legal nomos. The situation exemplifies what Robert Cover terms “Babel”: “not incoherence but a multiplicity of coherent systems,” an excess of normative worlds undergirded by narratives.⁷⁸ Even within the shared sovereign Moorish nomos, myriad interpretations are possible and, indeed, proliferate, etymologically as well as exegetically. The “problem of intelligibility among communities”⁷⁹ in this Babel is not merely a problem of communication between sovereigns and non-sovereigns, Moors and the state, but also between sovereign Moors and their fellow sovereign Moors. Indeed, one popular genre of sovereign Moorish YouTube video is that of debates or “battles” between sovereign Moorish thinkers who spar over conflicting versions of and methods for acquiring sovereign Moorish truth claims. A range of specific claims thus exist within a shared nomos, drawing on a shared lineage, a shared canon, and shared processes of authorization.

Like others in the sovereign citizen movement, sovereign Moors also hold to a shared conception of law as a transcendent power with the potential to change reality. Sovereign eschewal of specific

word occurrences, like Amen A. El’s analysis of idiomatic English. He argues that the “arrested development” (psychologically, socially, of the individual and the nation) of African Americans manifests “in their lingo, when they refer to their female partners as ‘mama’ and uses such adolescent terms as ‘crib’ for domicile!” (325). More mystically, he sees “occult meaning” in the “antiquated prophecy” of the book of Revelation, referencing as it does “the *leaves* of a curious unnamed *tree* [through which] the health of a nation might experience restoration.” He writes, “Etymological research has revealed that words like *leaf*, *tree*, *branch*, *root*, *folio*, *liber* and other such appellatives from the rich vernacular of Botany, has, since remotest antiquity, been employed by diverse cultures when referencing the varied instruments and technical formats of graphic communication or language,” a “scientific” claim that allows him, via some more comparative readings of texts, to reveal the secret of the Trees of Paradise, of Knowledge, and of Life (11).

76 “Taj Tariq Bey on the Battlefield,” 6:44.

77 *Ibid.*, 6:55.

78 Cover, “*Nomos* and Narrative,” 17n45.

79 *Ibid.*

laws and levels of authority/jurisdiction is not rooted in chaotic disregard but, rather, in an idealization of law as universal, communicable, and just. Sovereigns share a faith in the power of law to set the world right. Indeed, as scholar of new religions Catherine Wessinger has shown, sovereigns approach law and engage with law as if it were magic. Writing about the sovereign Montana Freeman besieged by FBI agents at a farm in Montana in 1996, Wessinger observes that the Freeman's engagement with legal discourse and documents resembled the use of magic. The value of this observation is that the sovereign legal *nomos* lived by the Freeman could be, by scholars, "analyzed in terms of magic," which Wessinger goes on to define as essentially a collection of "rituals (often involving speaking or writing words of power) that are believed to have the power to effect changes in the physical world."⁸⁰ This communal faith in law's transcendent efficacy, its power to alter circumstances, is shared by sovereign Moors, and to approach this understanding of the law as magical calls for further consideration of how magic is seen to work, by magicians, in a world largely populated by those who do not believe in its power.

The work of psychologist and scholar of religion T. M. Luhrmann provides insight into how contemporary magicians maintain the plausibility of a magical worldview. Emerging from ethnographic work with a range of magic practitioners in England, Luhrmann's book, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, makes a case that magicians evaluate the success of their magic via methods learned as part of the process of becoming a magician. First, perceptions of experience are distorted in favor of a bias toward the magical. Next, interpretations of those experiences are offered which likewise reflect that bias. Finally, rationalizations are constructed to advance and privilege the plausibility of magic as an active factor in the world.⁸¹ Luhrmann argues that such a pattern of perception, interpretation, and rationalization is learned as part of the process of becoming a magician. The plausibility of magic is maintained in two ways. First, by switching focus from the "world of uncertainty" to the individual and her experience, the magician can maintain the plausibility of magic by locating magic's efficacy in perception of "a greater sense of self-control and personal competence."⁸² Likewise, this process of biased perception, interpretation, and rationalization allows for a wide range of experience to be read as evidence of magical success and for attention to be given to (and validation received from) instances of partial success as well. Thus, even in cases of "apparent failure" the magician can find proof that magic works, "as when some event occurs that seems associated with the ritual, even if it is not its goal."⁸³

When Chief Noble Bandele El-Amin writes that "The difference between a black person and a Moor is that Moors know the law and black's do not," he is referring to something far more than mainstream understandings of—or a mainstream *nomos* of—the legal. Indeed, in his writing, El-Amin offers his readers initiation into an occult system of knowledge, which, as surely as any sorcery, is believed to have real and practical effects. El-Amin would surely balk at this characterization, as, for him and his co-religionists in the world of sovereign Moorish ideology, legal knowledge is objective, legal discourse is efficacious because recognized as real, and legal behavior is preeminently this-worldly, not the stuff of metaphysics. Yet the law, for such Moors, is understood to be a hidden reality, concealed by elaborate histories of conspiracy and oppression, revealed by certain adept masters as the salvation of their followers. Legal knowledge, for sovereign Moorish

80 Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 160.

81 T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 312.

82 *Ibid.*, 258 and 133.

83 *Ibid.*, 130.

thinkers, is a specific set of skills, and the process of learning those skills, that parallels the learning of magic as outlined by Luhmann. To learn magic—and to learn sovereign Moorish law—is to learn how to perceive, interpret, and rationalize experience such that one can provide evidence in support of the plausibility of one’s claims.

The Hermeneutics of Supersession: Conflation of the Sovereign Legal Nomos with the Nomos of the State

Yet if one challenge for contemporary magicians is that they live in a world populated by those who do not believe in magic, sovereigns live in a world in which the power of law is unquestioned. Indeed, sovereign Moors find themselves in a situation in which their own claims about the law, while in conflict with dominant claims, can nonetheless be read as validated by the existence of—and palpable power of—this dominant legal nomos. Cover argues that a given legal nomos is formed via “two corresponding ideal-typical patterns”: the “paideic,” predicated on “a common body or precept and narrative, a common and personal way of being educated into this corpus, and a sense of direction or growth that is constituted as the individual and his community work out the implications of their law”; and the “imperial,” wherein “norms are universal and *enforced* by institutions. They need not be taught at all, as long as they are effective.”⁸⁴ The American legal situation is thus characterized not only by the Babel of conflicting nomoi but also by “a radical dichotomy between the social organization of law as power and the organization of law as meaning.”⁸⁵ He writes of the courts as necessarily *jurispathic* (law-killing), judging as they do between laws and seeking to terminate many of the various laws produced by communities in acts of “extrastate jurisgenesis.”⁸⁶ The sovereign citizen example, however, reveals the existence of extrastate communities that do not merely engage in the cultural creation of law but, further, engage in the *jurispathic* act of judging between laws under the framework of there being only one. Sovereign citizens understand the situation of multiple interpretations as one not of multiple nomoi but of incorrect understandings of one superior, universal nomos. In Cover’s language, sovereigns, like apologists for the courts, “state the problem not as one of *too much* law, but as one of *unclear* law,” a move which, by approaching the situation not as one of multiple coherent interpretations of the law, but, rather, “difference of opinion about *the* law seems to presuppose that there is a hermeneutic that is methodologically superior to those employed by the communities that offer their own law.”⁸⁷ Sovereign citizens do not merely appropriate legal discourse, seizing a tool of the state to use as a weapon for their own liberation;⁸⁸ they appropriate as well the state’s attitude about and conception of its *jurispathic* role. At the same time, conflating their own nomos with that of the state allows for the state’s undeniable power of state application of the law—to arrest, to imprison, even to control the protocol for communication within the courtroom—to be read, by sovereign Moors, as further evidence of their own claims about “the law” in general. The power

84 Cover, “*Nomos and Narrative*,” 12–13.

85 *Ibid.*, 18.

86 *Ibid.*, 53.

87 *Ibid.*, 42.

88 Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 160. Wessinger argues that sovereign groups like the Montana Freemen should be examined via the category of “nativist movements.” Nativist movements are characterized by responding to a situation of perceived (or real) oppression with the desire “to gain and utilize the invisible power that the dominating group appears to possess . . . to acquire that power in order to defeat the controlling government and to establish the native’s idealized past golden age.” *Ibid.*

of the state, exerted in the service of its own jurispathic action, is perceived, interpreted, and rationalized by sovereigns within their own jurispathic desire.

Cover writes that “most communities will avoid outright conflict with a judge’s interpretations, at least when he will likely back them with violence.”⁸⁹ In those cases (when state and community offer conflicting interpretations) “the community must elaborate the hermeneutics of resistance or of withdrawal.”⁹⁰ There is a third option for sovereigns. Sovereigns insist “*nomos* other than that of the state” persists in the face of conflict, wherein conflation of the sovereign *nomos* and the *nomos* of the state allows for a response to conflict that is neither withdrawal nor resistance but, rather, a hermeneutics of supersession, as sovereign “law” is argued as the correct and only version of “the law.”⁹¹

In this hermeneutics of supersession, moreover, the obvious power at play in interactions in court or confrontations with police reinforces sovereign understandings about the overarching (magical) power of the law. For instance, sovereign Moorish lecturer Queen Valahra Renita El Harre-Bey (“Queen V”) begins her lesson on “Black’s Law,” with the question of “what law really is.”⁹² Law is singular, and while her claims are at once practical and theological, she urges her audiences—both in person and via the internet, where her recorded presentations are available on YouTube—to acquire and use true knowledge of the law, a task which requires confrontation in the institutionalized settings of legal authority, the courtroom, the encounter with the police officer, the realm of tax documents, and other official legal forms. Via appeals to the scriptural tradition of Noble Drew Ali and various etymological claims rooted in selective dictionary use, Queen V argues that law and religion, for Moors, are one, and that, moreover, the only actual law is that performed by sovereigns. She is explicit: “The only people who can issue law are people who are acting in their sovereign capacity,”⁹³ and all others (those in “corporate ward status,” those contractually bound by birth certificates) are merely “us[ing] words of art to make you believe in fact that law is on the table when you walk into a courthouse or a court room.”⁹⁴ Only the sovereign can bring law into the courthouse. Only sovereigns can recognize true law, and only sovereigns can use it. “Law can only be used by people who are in their sovereign capacity,” she says.⁹⁵ And while this excludes the 99 percent of the world that live in legal slavery from using the law, her mission is to uplift people by educating them into true legal knowledge and, thus, liberation. She urges her listeners to look up the word “citizen” in any legal dictionary, where they will learn that “A citizen is not a sovereign.”⁹⁶ She then proceeds with her lessons, imparting sovereign legal knowledge and skill such that her audience, formerly unconscious of their oppression as well as their potential power through law, can now stand equipped with expertise and assert their legal rights. She instructs them, for instance, to declare to judges, “My honor—not your honor,” and demand proof of jurisdiction over sovereigns: “What is your status? What is your nationality?” A European (white) judge, after all, cannot be sovereign here in the land rightfully owned by Moors: “If they want to be sovereign, they’ve got to go home. They cannot be sovereign here.” Ask them, “Where is your proof of naturalization in my land,” she instructs, “Who gave you

89 Cover, “*Nomos* and Narrative,” 53.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 “Queen Valahra Renita El Harre-Bey: MOORISH LAW (Full Lessons),” YouTube video, 0:41, posted by “Keishon T. Kessee El-Bey,” June 6, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNihE3McnRk>.

93 Ibid., 3:36.

94 Ibid., 3:44 and 0:29.

95 Ibid., 1:24.

96 Ibid., 4:37.

the authority to be here; who issued you the authority to act in any capacity?” If such questions prove futile, she tells her followers to simply “stand mute,” “stand in your square,” the so-called court has no authority over you, can do nothing to you.⁹⁷ There is no law in the court except for that law which the sovereign knows and expounds: this is the hermeneutics of supersession, jurispathic in the face of Babel, yet surely chaotic seeming to the judges and lawyers who find themselves facing such a sovereign legal expert.

“To know the law—and certainly to live the law,” Cover writes, is essentially to know and live out a set of commitments, commitments that may well put the individual in conflict with (and thus subject to the violence of) the state.⁹⁸ To know the law as a sovereign Moor is to proclaim an identity in relation to the law and to take part in methods of authorizing interpretations and claims rooted in history, scripture, and etymological interpretation. Commitment to the power of names and words, narratives and readings of statements from the founding prophet, Noble Drew Ali, is part of a broader commitment to a legal *nomos* in which law is understood and engaged as magical. For sovereign Moors, to approach the law “in terms of magic” is also to employ strategies for the maintaining of plausibility for that conception, to be educated into biased perceptions, interpretations, and rationalizations that read evidence for law’s magical nature in a range of experiences—even in conflictual encounters with the legal *nomos* of the state. For, finally, to be committed to a sovereign Moorish legal *nomos* is to be committed to a hermeneutics of supersession, wherein the appearance of law in the courts and in interactions with officials is explicitly false law. The sovereign Moorish *nomos* is jurispathic, convinced that there is only one true law. The duty of the sovereign Moor is to uplift others by educating them into knowledge of that law—as set of commitments and as ideal, as identity and array of skills, as *nomos* and as practice.

97 Ibid., 11:30.

98 Cover, “*Nomos* and Narrative,” 46.