

Islamic Aspects of the Legacy of Malcolm X

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Spike Lee's 1992 film, "Malcolm X," is the most recent evidence of the increased popularity of Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz). The film, based on a screenplay by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl, sparked controversy over "X" memorabilia and also a debate over the appropriate interpretation of Malcolm X's legacy. For example, black nationalist Amiri Baraka opposed Lee's portrayal and criticized the film as an attempt to "make middle class Negroes sleep easier."¹ Yet when the current controversy and debate end, the Islamic aspects will remain, as before, the most significant and least recognized elements of Malcolm X's legacy. This paper briefly examines this phenomenon in order to offer a more accurate and meaningful analysis of the significance of Malcolm X.

Although Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* climbed to the *New York Times*' best-seller list in 1992, popular media accounts, such as Lee's film, have stimulated even greater social interest. As one writer notes, "if many blacks did not listen when he was alive, young blacks are listening now."² It is also interesting to note how "Malcolm X's appeal has crossed racial barriers in a way that would have been unthinkable during his life."³ Nevertheless, the emergent popularity of Malcolm X in the 1990s is a direct result of the lingering presence of racism and of his own martyrdom in the struggle against it.

Most mainstream analyses associate Malcolm X's message with violence and hatred of white America. For example, his oft-quoted phrase, "by any means necessary," and his advocacy of martial arts proficiency and rifle club formation for defenseless black victims of racial violence

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¹*New York Times*, 15 November 1992.

²*Ibid.*, 18 November 1992.

³*Ibid.*

are often identified as evidence of a violent anti-white message. The stark contrast between the nonviolent civil rights movement led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the paramilitary Fruit of Islam developed by Malcolm X reinforces this view. Thus King is associated with racial harmony and nonviolence, while Malcolm X is associated with hatred and violence.

The civil rights movement, in which King was a major figure, exhorted blacks to fight racial injustice by loving their enemies, ostensibly in the tradition of Jesus Christ and reminiscent of Ghandi's nonviolence movement in India. In contrast, Malcolm X's image during the 1950s and the 1960s was derived largely from fear and the political establishment's efforts to disassociate his message from King's more palatable one. However, in the final analysis, both Malcolm X's and King's messages were distorted by public efforts to exaggerate their differences and ignore their common commitment to justice and equality for all Americans.

The question of whether Malcolm X advocated violence depends less on public debate than on how one defines "advocate of violence" and "advocate of nonviolence." If "advocate of nonviolence" refers to those who forfeit the right to defend their community against the unwarranted brutality of police dogs, lynch mobs, beatings, or killing, then Malcolm X, and most Americans for that matter, cannot be considered "nonviolent." However, if "nonviolent" refers to abstinence from aggression and behaving nonviolently toward those who are nonviolent with you, then he was most certainly an advocate of nonviolence.

Yet it is also true, undoubtedly to the political establishment's regret, that Malcolm X was one of the few black leaders of the 1960s to advocate self-defense for victims of racial violence. This aspect of his message is the most controversial. Indeed, in the words of CBS news correspondent Mike Wallace: "Malcolm scared people."⁴

But his image as an advocate of violence ignores the climate of violence and overt racism of the 1960s and its consequences for blacks, other racial minorities, and advocates of racial equality. His own assassination (1965), and those of King (1968) and other prominent leaders during the 1960s (i.e., John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Medgar Evers), led many to conclude that "violence is as American as apple pie." It is against this background that Malcolm X's image must be judged, for his advocacy of black self-defense was a response to white racist violence in his own personal experience. White racism may have caused the forced removal of his siblings to foster care homes by the state, the confinement of his mother to a mental institution, and the "mysterious" death of his father following Ku Klux Klan harrassment in his native Nebraska.

There are some discrepancies between the image and message of Malcolm X. For example, his image is associated with criminal activity, yet he emphasized discipline, family, and education. His image is one of violence, yet he called for self-defense and the end of black oppression.

⁴Ibid., 3 December 1992.

He was supposedly anti-white, yet he consistently emphasized positive self-esteem, self-reliance, and respect for others. Thus the "real Malcolm X" remains a mystery to some, as recent press reports appear to suggest.⁵ However, for Muslims at least, the current public debate over Malcolm X only obscures the deeper and more lasting significance of his legacy.

From street hustler to spokesman for the Nation of Islam to martyr, the most profound aspect of Malcolm X's legacy was his courage to change and his search for meaning. Lee's depiction of this aspect of his legacy is apparent in the character "Baines," Malcolm's prison mentor in the film, who reminds Malcolm that "if you take one step toward Allah, Allah will take two steps toward you." Malcolm X's journey from hustler to Nation of Islam spokesman and to Sunni Muslim after his hajj illustrates the central role of change and the search for meaning in his life.

These features are also evident in his observations on prison life. "I'd put prison second to college as the best place for a man to go if he needs to do some thinking. If he's motivated, in prison he can change his life."⁶ Prison had a profound effect on him. Recalling his prison experience, Malcolm X wrote: "Once a man has been to prison, he never looks at himself or at other people the same again."⁷ Indeed, it was in prison that he had his first spiritual vision and where he performed what he describes as one of the most difficult acts in his entire life: his first public performance of prayer (*ṣalāh*).

Change for him was neither random nor without purpose, but rather was driven by a search for meaning via reeducation in the tradition of such great black writers as Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, J. A. Rogers, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and others. But what distinguishes Malcolm X's thought from the distinguished black writers before him was the distinctly Islamic character of his quest: "Allah will never change the Grace which He hath bestowed on a people until they change what is in their (own) souls: And verily Allah is He who heareth and knoweth (all things)" (Qur'an 8:53).

As a young undergraduate in 1967, I vividly recall how the closing line of Malcolm X's autobiography led me to investigate and later revert to Islam (rather than convert to Islam, since black people played a major role in establishing Islam in Arabia and many American slaves were Muslims). The last paragraph of his autobiography concludes:

Yes, I have cherished my "demagogue" role. I know that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist

⁵Ibid.

⁶Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 396.

⁷Ibid.

cancer that is malignant in the body of America—then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine.⁸

Then and now, this message provides a potent call to American blacks to struggle against the falsehood and oppression learned and accepted during centuries of slavery, miseducation, and institutional racism.

Despite efforts to denounce Malcolm X as a mere demagogue, his message inspired a generation of black youth in the 1960s and the 1970s. At first glance, it might seem surprising to find that his appeal to the youth of the 1990s is as strong as it was in the 1960s and 1970s. The persistence of his appeal clearly reflects the significance of his message.

For example, concerning his differences with King about the motivations of white America, his insightful reply was "time will tell." His efforts to transform the debate from one of civil rights to one of human rights took place a full decade before President Carter introduced the nation's first human rights policy. His warning to the political establishment of what would happen if the demands of Muslim and Christian leaders were ignored was a strikingly accurate forecast of the emergence of the American black nationalist movement and the resulting urban rebellions of 1965 to 1972.

His call for blacks to reject a life of government "welfare" dependency and to develop entrepreneurial skills for self-sufficiency came more than two decades before President Reagan's anti-government campaign. In fact, Malcolm X's message has led some black Republicans, including Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, to see him as an early forerunner of neoconservatism. During the 1980s, other noted black conservatives (i.e., economists Walter Williams and Thomas Sowell) frequently praised the Nation of Islam's schools, organized by Malcolm X, as models of self-help. Black nationalist attempts to resolve the peculiar problem of young black males in Milwaukee, Detroit, Chicago, and other cities have featured all-male educational settings. They are widely known for their strict discipline and/or single-sex approach to education, both of which Malcolm X helped to develop in the Nation of Islam.⁹

Muslim self-defense security patrols in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and New York have assisted local law enforcement officials in the war against drugs. The organized presence of Muslims in ghettos across the nation represents one of the few remaining pillars of stability in black America in the 1990s. Finally, Malcolm X acknowledged women's central role in the moral, intellectual, and technological advancement of society more than a decade before the feminist movement of the 1970s. This is especially noteworthy, since Muslims are frequently criticized by feminists for the role given to Muslim women.

⁸Ibid., 388.

⁹*New York Times*, 2 December 1992.

Since his murder on February 21, 1965, during a speech at the Audubon Ballroom in New York, just three months before his forty-ninth birthday, analyses of Malcolm X have focused on one or more of the following questions: a) Did he advocate violence; b) Did his assassins work alone; c) In addition to the Nation of Islam, did the American government play a role in his assassination; d) Which period of his life more closely reflects "the real Malcolm X"; and e) What might he have evolved into politically had he not been assassinated?

The speculative character of these questions has produced a variety of erroneous accounts of his legacy. For example, one assessment argues that Malcolm X evolved from an "impoverished child" to a "powerful humanist."¹⁰ Another states that during the final months of his life, he became increasingly anticapitalist, prosocialist, and anti-imperialist, although he is also known to have stated: "I still would be hard-pressed to give a specific definition of the overall philosophy which I think is necessary for the liberation of the black people in this country."¹¹ A *New York Times* book review by Michael Eric Dyson on Bruce Perry's *Malcolm X: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* makes reference to his alleged "hatred of women."

Malcolm X espoused many strong views during his life, among them support for human rights, opposition to capitalist exploitation and imperialism, rejection of public "welfare" for blacks, and black separatist nationalism. Yet it is erroneous to conclude, as many have done, that his advocacy of these views makes him a humanist, a socialist, a neo-conservative, or a black nationalist. One view even suggests that Malcolm X's discussions with the Ku Klux Klan and association with the "black supremacist" Nation of Islam made him a racist. The erroneous and speculative nature of such views intensifies the need for a serious examination of the Islamic aspects of his legacy.

An analysis of the Islamic aspects of his life is essential to understanding Malcolm X. These center around several points: a) Islam's consistency and centrality in his message; b) Its role as a method of analysis and instrument of change; c) Its significance as a vehicle for political mobilization; d) The influence of Makkah; and e) Islam's role as a facilitator of alliances with Muslims and others engaged in the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.

In life and in death, Malcolm X remained a Muslim. Attempts to understand him through the lens of America's perennial racial debate trivialize his message and the universality of his significance. While his Detroit Red, demagogic, and El Hajj Malik El Shabbaz images are essential to understanding his evolution from street hustler to black nationalist to Muslim, his entire life and message provide a more enduring reflection

¹⁰Ibid., 15 November 1992.

¹¹Ibid., 29 November 1992.

of his legacy. In light of this, the choice of some youths to emulate only one or another aspect of his complex and evolving life seems misguided.

Although often overlooked, it was Islam that stimulated Malcolm X to educate and discipline himself in prison. Islamic principles, such as the right of self-defense, provided the moral basis for Malcolm X's most controversial message. As it says in the Qur'an:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you. But do not transgress Limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors; And slay them wherever ye catch them, And turn them out from where they have turned you out; For persecution is worse than slaughter; But fight them not at the Sacred Mosque unless they (first) fight you there; But if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who reject faith. But if they cease, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them on until there is no more persecution and the religion becomes Allah's. But if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression. (2:190-93)

Malcolm X's wife and children were Muslims. It was his brothers, Philbert, Wesley, Wilfred, and Reginald, rather than the fictional character "Baines" in Lee's film, who introduced him to Islam.¹² They, along with their sister Ella (who financed Malcolm X's hajj¹³), were members of the Nation of Islam. And it was his hajj that inspired him to change his anti-white racial attitudes and to form the Muslim Mosque Inc. upon his return to the United States.

Those analyses of Malcolm X that ignore the Islamic legacy of his message reflect a rejection by some of the authenticity of American-based Islamic movements. Despite his adoption of Sunni Islam following his hajj, many writers continue to associate him exclusively with the Nation of Islam. Another reflection of cynicism toward the authenticity of the Islamic identity of American blacks is the media term "Black Muslims," which ironically is only used to refer to Muslims in America of ex-slave ancestry and never to those Muslims from abroad who are also black.

Moreover, blacks in America are frequently challenged by white Americans to distinguish between "Muslim" and "Moslem" and ultimately between "Black Muslim" and "Moslem." Arabic speakers know that "Moslem" is an incorrect transliteration of the Arabic "Muslim," although it is significant to note that other Muslims often provide quite different explanations of this phenomenon. However, from the point of view of American blacks, when whites ask them to distinguish "Muslim" from "Moslem," what they are actually asking is: are you really a Moslem, and

¹²Ibid., 3 December 1992.

¹³Haley, *Autobiography*, 324.

if you are, then why are people abroad who presumably follow the same religion often called Moslems, while American blacks (whether they are Sunni, Shi'a, or other) are called Black Muslims? What's the difference?

American blacks who are Muslims, not unlike other Muslims, display varying degrees of Islamic awareness and practice. Their Islamic sophistication before the mid-1960s was severely constrained by limited opportunities to maintain contact with overseas Muslims. Most were further constrained by the limited socioeconomic and educational opportunities that curtailed their ability to acquire a more thorough knowledge and understanding of Islam. For example, while Muslims of the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Movement, and other groups display only elements of Islam, other Muslim groups in America, such as the Sunni communities in New York, Washington, D.C., and the Midwest, and organizations led by Warith Deen Muhammad in Chicago and California, display a greater affinity with the Sunnah of the Prophet and therefore with traditional Islam.

The first Muslim organizations among free black Americans consisted of blacks introduced to Islam either in prison or in the ghetto—a community stripped of its language, history, culture, and religion, and faced with the constant challenge of racism. Relatively few were introduced to Islam through other avenues. Thus the quality, sophistication, and practice of true Islam among black Americans was often adversely affected. Despite this, however, their lack of sophistication and purity had no visible impact on their strength of belief or quality of commitment. For example, the demonstrated success of such Islamic organizations as the Nation of Islam in positively transforming these circumstances has been frequently praised.

Malcolm X's own words capture this phenomenon clearly. Following his hajj, he visited Senegal, where a Senegalese revealed that: "Our people can't speak Arabic, but we have Islam in our hearts." Malcolm X's response was: "I told them that exactly described their fellow Afro-American Muslims."¹⁴

The more general question of Islamic authenticity among American blacks is a matter of historical record rather than one of political debate. For example, Lincoln notes that despite stern measures to discourage such practices, "accounts persist of Muslim slaves who committed the entire Qur'an to memory in an effort to keep the faith alive and to pass it on to others."¹⁵ He concludes: "The memory of Islam, however tenuous, was never completely lost to the slave experience."¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., 366.

¹⁵C. Eric Lincoln, "The American Muslim Mission in the Context of American Social History" in *The Muslim Community in North America*. eds. Earle H. Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban, and Regula B. Qureshi (Edmonton, Alberta: Univ. of Alberta Press, 1983), 218.

¹⁶Ibid., 219.

In fact, it was the "Moors" among the Spanish conquistadors who introduced Islam to the New World.¹⁷ Several writers, including Carter G. Woodson and (more recently) Emily Kalled Lovell, have written that the first Muslim in America was a black Spanish conquistador named Estevanico (or Little Stephen), who arrived in Arizona during 1539. Woodson credits him with being the first non-native to "discover" what is now the American southwest.¹⁸ The second recorded Muslim to reach America was Hajj Ali-Hi Jolly, who worked in Arizona and California as an experimental camel breeder.¹⁹

The authenticity of the Islam practiced by Africans and their descendants in America is given credence by: a) Important black figures in Islamic history such as Bilal, the first muezzin in Islam; b) African centers of learning such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Jene; c) Famous African Islamic leaders like Mansa Musa, Uthman dan Fodio, Sundiata, and Samory ibn Lafia as well as black scholars like "Luqman the Wise" (mentioned in the Qur'an); and d) Great Islamic empires in Africa: Mali, Guinea, and Songhay. While the evolutionary history of Muslim organizations in the United States makes it clear that reeducation is required for blacks in order to adopt a more accurate knowledge of themselves and their practice of Islam, the average white American displays an even greater ignorance of the roots of Islam in America.

Even among Islamic scholars, the awareness of the history of Islam among blacks in Africa and the United States is often minuscule or rudimentary at best. Thus there is little wonder why the Islamic aspects of Malcolm X's legacy, as well as the legacy of Islam itself, are so often ignored or dismissed as fantasy. In the final analysis, though, questions concerning the Islamic authenticity of blacks in America are best resolved by the Qur'anic reminder that Allah is the best knower.

The role of Islam as a method of analysis and an instrument of change is well documented among American blacks. Timothy Drew, known among his followers as Noble Drew Ali, established the "Moorish Science Temple" in Newark, New Jersey, during 1913. Lincoln describes this movement as a "melange of Black nationalism and Christian revivalism with an awkward, confused admixture of the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad." Although the Moorish Science Temple movement did not practice pure Islam, it was a "significant recovery of the awareness of Islam."²⁰

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Lovell, Emily Kalled, "Islam in the United States: Past and Present," in *The Muslim Community in North America*. eds. Earle H. Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban, and Regula B. Qureshi (Edmonton, Alberta: Univ. of Alberta Press, 1983), 94.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Lincoln, "The American Muslim Mission," 221.

Ali died mysteriously in 1929 following a "violent eruption" with the Moorish Science Movement. His movement is generally recognized as the first in the postslavery era to promote aspects of Islam as a method of analysis and a vehicle for change and social consciousness among blacks. It was succeeded by the Nation of Islam in the early 1930s. The Nation, as it is often called by American blacks, was led by Elijah Muhammad, who recruited Malcolm X as national spokesman shortly after the latter's release from prison and rise within the organization.

Islam's role as a vehicle for political mobilization among American blacks has been an important factor in Islam's emergence in this country. As Lovell asserts: "Probably the most spectacular phase in the history of Islam in the U.S. was the conversion of Black Muslims to true Islam after pilgrimages to Mecca and other Muslim countries by such leaders as Malcolm X."²¹ However, analyses of religious movements, such as the one provided by Lovell, typically evaluate religious movements by the strength of their numbers rather than the quality of their beliefs. Thus Lovell's interpretation of the post-Makkah phase of Malcolm X's Islamic experience as the "most spectacular phase in the history of Islam in the U.S." due to the "conversion of Black Muslims to 'true Islam,'" reflects a Christian missionary perspective rather than an Islamic one.

Although Lovell's attention is to quality of belief, as illustrated by her reference to the conversion of blacks to "true Islam," her statement, like most of the literature, emphasizes the weaknesses while ignoring the strengths of Islamic belief among American blacks. Such statements create divisiveness among Muslims by conveying an erroneous image of American blacks to Muslims around the world. They also trivialize the historical role of Islam among blacks in the United States through a) their use of the word "conversion" rather than "reversion," and b) their practice of failing to acknowledge that Islamic revival movements among American blacks appeared at least two decades before similar movements emerged elsewhere in the Islamic world during this century.

Unfortunately, details regarding the character of early Islam in the United States, especially among American blacks, remains largely absent from the literature. A number of factors account for this condition. First, a hostile climate toward minorities forced Muslim organizations to remain underground. In this regard, it is important to note that most of the major Islamic movements among American blacks prior to the 1980s were secret and separatist in nature. Thus the reply of Malcolm X and other "Black Muslims" in the Nation of Islam to the question of how many "Black Muslims" there were in America was: "Those who say do not know, and those who know do not say." An amazing consequence of this phenomenon has been the number of young writers who, in recent years, have attempted to examine Islam among American blacks without ever directly witnessing or experiencing the phenomenon. The status of secret

²¹Lovell, "Islam in the United States," 95.

societies of "Black Muslims," especially during the 1950s to the 1970s, was not unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in the Islamic world. Indeed, Malcolm X's legacy of political mobilization of American blacks under the banner of Islam was not unlike that of Ḥasan al Bannā, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

As public knowledge of black American Muslim organizations is lacking due to their clandestine character, limitations exist in the quality and quantity of published material. Yvonne Haddad's work is a major exception. Nonpublic sources of information, such as the FBI's files on the "Black Muslims," are no doubt abundant. The Nation of Islam was so thoroughly infiltrated during the 1960s and the 1970s that Malcolm X's personal bodyguard is alleged to have been a police informant. In the only detailed study of the Nation of Islam, E. U. Essien Udom found it "under police surveillance in every city where there is a Temple" and under FBI surveillance for "possible subversive tendencies."²² Malcolm X, who assisted Essien Udom with his book on black nationalism, was later received by this man during his post-Makkah visit to Nigeria.²³

Malcolm X's impact on the turbulent politics of the 1960s was both deep and extensive. While his recent growth in popularity, especially among young blacks, is in part a recognition of this impact, the sentimental character of his recent popularity often obscures his legacy's organizational and institutional impact. Malcolm X not only set the tone of political activism and debate for black Americans during the 1960s and 1970s; he provided an ideological core for that debate emanating from a highly organized and nationwide base (the Nation of Islam) in its early stage, and from a diffuse set of black nationalist organizations (i.e., the OAAU, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Panther Party) in its later stage. The force of his ideas and leadership skills created an Islamic legacy of "Black Muslim"-inspired political themes such as the need for a new self-image, black pride, economic self-sufficiency, black community control, independent schools, and an uncompromising demand for equality, all of which continue to defy analyses relying exclusively on Islamicist or race politics perspectives.

Essien Udom's study recognizes the Nation of Islam's vast influence on a generation of black American leaders, many of whom were former members or were directly influenced by one or more of its articulate and dynamic ministers. Eldridge Cleaver, a founder of the Black Panther Party, was a former member of the Nation of Islam. In addition, such prominent black politicians, writers, activists, and entrepreneurs as Rev. Jesse Jackson, Amiri Baraka, Dick Gregory, and Spike Lee have incorporated significant features of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam into their own activities with varying degrees of success.

²²Essien Udom, E. U. *Black Nationalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), 5.

²³Haley, *Autobiography*, 355.

The influence of Malcolm X's hajj represents a turning point not only in his own life but in the evolution of Islam in America, for it allowed him to acquire a more thorough understanding of Islam and its universal and therefore far-reaching appeal. In spite of his contribution to the evolution of Islam in America, his post-Makkah message proved too much for some, and he was assassinated. While his courage and determination caused him to become a martyr, to many of his fellow Muslims his legacy reinforced their commitment to the Islamic ideals for which he fought and died. The martyrdom of Malcolm X was therefore an important milestone in the evolution of "true Islam" in America.

After his hajj, Malcolm X visited Egypt, Lebanon, Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Morocco, and Algeria. He returned to the United States on May 21, 1964. His successful trip and efforts to forge international links represent perhaps the first deliberate bid by a black American leader to internationalize the struggle for civil and human rights. His international travel, hajj, and visits with prominent Islamic leaders provided legitimacy to black American Muslims. While it is true that Malcolm X's hajj was among the first to be made by a black American Muslim, it is important to remember that this as well as his other achievements were driven by Islamic beliefs, values, and principles: the unity and oneness of Allah (*tawhīd*), the value of historical analysis and observation, the centrality of struggle (jihad), and the merits of emigration (*hijrah*) and of change in the search for knowledge and meaning.

In conclusion, the Islamic aspects of Malcolm X's legacy provide a compelling though long-ignored perspective on his life. The American preoccupation with racial politics obscures his more central contributions to Islamic life in the United States: his introduction of distinctly Muslim values and beliefs to black social consciousness, the development of "true Islam," and the forging of international alliances between American blacks' and other oppressed peoples' struggles. Such a perspective provides a more accurate and a more meaningful interpretation not only of Malcolm X and his legacy, but also of the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality undertaken by American Muslims and the evolution of a domestic and international consciousness among black Americans.

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