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Book Review

PALMER, S. J. 2010. *The Nuwaubian Nation: Black Spirituality and State Control*. Farnham: Ashgate. xl + 177 pp. Hbk. £50.00. ISBN 0-7546-6255-1.

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The United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors, previously known as the Ansarah Allah Community, Holy Tabernacle Ministries, and the Yamassee Native American Moors, sits as one of the most eclectic, syncretic, transformative and fascinating religious movements to have emerged from the post civil rights black cultic-milieu, or "blackosophy," in modern American society. Throughout their history, the movement has embraced seemingly diverse identities and mythologies based upon Islam, Mahdism, Hebrew narratives, Egyptian religion, Black Freemasonry, Native American rights and Ufological cosmologies.

Led by Dwight York, who is currently serving a 135-year prison sentence, the movement is often portrayed by the "mainstream" media as a "black hate group," although Palmer here argues that the movement is best understood as an "identity" or "racialist" group which is characterized by possessing "major doctrines based on a value-laden myth or sacred history of the origin and meaning of race" (p. 160).

The research in this volume results from close ethnographic study of the Nuwaubian movement by Palmer – the challenges of which are outlined in the preface, which explores both the general problems of "objectivity" and the specific problems of a white female sociologist engaging with a black patriarchal movement. Facilitated by the opinion held by some Nuwaubians that Palmer may be a "white angel," access to this world-rejecting group has been surprisingly open, although some ritual aspects, specifically those linked with higher degree Masonic orders within the movement, have been kept from Palmer.

The result is a volume which weaves together three very distinct narratives, in addition to Palmer's commentary: "insider" worldviews, apostate testimonies and "establishment" voices (which include both law enforcement agencies and the "fourth estate" of the mainstream media). Palmer's gift is to navigate so successfully the conflicting discourses of these views of the movement, understanding them as an overlapping and conflicting network of interest groups. Palmer's solution to the discordant images projected by these conflicting Interest Groups is to propose a mixed hermeneutic which seeks to "overstand" the Nuwaubians – a phrase borrowed from Rastafarian philosophy. In so doing, this volume suggests understanding York as a "divine fool"—and here, one should remember York's seemingly eccentric behaviour in Court where he dressed variously in African American and Native American clothing and also where he reprimanded the judge for using his name, citing copyright infringement. With strong roots in the Indian guru tradition, the concept of "crazy wisdom" or "divine madness" offers a counter-narrative to simply (mis)understanding York as "strange" or "weird," which was the clear view of the establishment figures in Georgia, where York was tried. Likewise, the counter-cultural visual spectacle of Nuwaubians dressed

as Egyptian Pharaohs and Yamassee Indians performing dances and protests outside the Georgia courtrooms is interpreted by Palmer as an apocalyptic ritual designed to both concretize the identity of the members in relation to York's prophecies, and also as part of a wider spiral of "deviance amplification" undertaken by the group to distance themselves from what they understood to be a corrupt legal process. Indeed, Palmer notes that: "York's mission was (and still is) to lead his disciples on a winding journey backwards in time, unpeeling layer after layer of false or incomplete identity, to rediscover their origins as god-like beings, utterly alien and inaccessible to the laws and limitations of the Paleman and the reign of Shaytan" (p. 146). Similarly, Palmer argues for an understanding of York's rampant eclecticism and counter-culture morality as a form of Gnostic worldview – suggesting that the Nuwaubian concept of "right knowledge" should be aligned with more ancient understandings of the mystical revelation of the self, which is brought about through *gnosis*.

Much of this volume comprises a history of the movement and a concentration upon the legal problems that the movement has had, both collectively within the wider community in Georgia, and individually with regard to the crimes for which York has been found guilty. Of course, this creates for itself a problematic situation in that, due to the intimate nature of the crimes accused, we are reliant upon conflicting testimonies. Of course, this was the same position in which the jurors found themselves for York's trial, although it is clear that Palmer feels that it was impossible for York to receive a "fair" trial at all in Georgia, due to the critical narratives of contemporary law enforcement and media representatives, who often (quite openly) worked in tandem in their investigations into the Nuwaubian community.

One problem with this volume, which is so sadly avoidable but must be raised, is that the text is littered with proofreading errors. Unfortunately, this extends beyond simple spelling or grammatical errors to include the misspelling of names and ordering of footnotes.

This volume is an important contribution to the ethnographic study of new religious communities. Drawing upon "insider," "apostate" and "establishment" testimonies, Palmer uses interviews, blogs, web fora and shared pilgrimage experiences to represent the Nuwaubian community's worldview. Effective use of apostate interviews, local press cuttings and interviews with law enforcement agencies and legal counsels ensure also that Palmer is successful in "overstanding" the Nuwaubians, not from an apologetic stance, nor from a blatantly reductionist "establishment" stance, but by providing a much needed commentary and evaluation of this controversial and noteworthy movement.