

Aufsatz

African American Religio-Cultural Projection and Accommodation from a Co-Cultural Perspective

Péter Gaál-Szabó

Department of Foreign Languages
Debrecen Reformed Theological University
Kálvin tér 16.
H-4026 Debrecen
dszabop@yahoo.com

Abstract

Religio-cultural projection plays a heightened role in the African American community in the 1950s and 1960s as it seeks both to juxtapose the black self with whites in a positive way and, regarding ingroup dynamics, to strengthen a new authentic cultural identity. Co-cultural theorizing provides a prime tool to examine possible outcomes of the inherently intercultural treatise. The paper proposes to examine one of them, accommodation, to prove the success of cultural projection in sermons and speeches of relevant leaders of the Black Church and Black Muslims in the period.

Keywords: cultural projection, co-cultural, Martin Luther King, Jr, Vernon Johns, Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad

The 1950s and 1960s witnesses the advent of a newly emerging African American religio-cultural projection triggered by the need in the African American community to re-establish themselves in response to white subversive challenges and to authenticate the African American self for itself—a maneuver proving a growing emphasis on accommodation instead of assimilation (a move away from the racial binary). It is this phenomenon that I examine in the study, using co-cultural theory, an intercultural theory positing different preferred outcomes, i.e., assimilation, accommodation, and separation.¹ Religio-cultural projection can mainly be connected to two religio-cultural groups, the Black Church and the Black Muslims. Sermons

¹ I deal with the other two types in forthcoming studies elsewhere.

and speeches of the prominent leaders—Vernon Johns, Martin Luther King, Jr., Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X—heralding new cultural understanding provide special ways to communicate the cultural self and to project positive images before both the ingroup and outgroup.

In the 1960s the term accommodation evokes questioning of American modernity, even “a turn toward a fundamental disbelief in the inherent goodness of the offerings of modernity” (Hall 2001: 4) following the violence against African Americans in the decade. “Antimodernism” led to a crisis of the ideals of the black elite, which, in Harold Cruse’s coinage,

worshipped at the altar of the white Anglo-Saxon ideal. Thereby, it collaborated spiritually in spreading the pall of debased and unprocreative white middle-class cultural values that shroud America today (cf. Hall 2001: 4).

It is that sentiment that urges the inclusion of “the slave’s point of view” (Gilroy 1993: 55) in any social, political, and cultural discourse, as well as that impacts the communication strategy of the selected religious leaders “to adjust their speech styles [. . .] to foster social identity, shared expression of values, attitudes, and intentions” (Heath and Bryant 2000: 284). From a cultural point of view, accommodation pertains to establishing and communicating the African American self in the interaction in the first place. To achieve that a higher degree of intragroup verification is needed than in the case of assimilation. With growing insistence by 1967, King does it successfully in his sermon “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life:”

Too many Negroes are ashamed of themselves, ashamed of being black. (Yes, sir) A Negro got to rise up and say from the bottom of his soul, ‘I am somebody. (Yes) I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage. However exploited and however painful my history has been, I’m black, but I’m black and beautiful’ (Yeah) (par. 6).

King’s fundamentally accommodative conviction echoes in this sermon the bottom line philosophy of the Black Arts movement and Black Nationalism as expressed by Malcolm X:

[. . .] when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong, what do you do? You integrate it with cream [. . .] But if you pour too much cream in it, you won’t even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it puts you to sleep (1965: 16).

In a similar way, thus, King both expresses discontent with the contemporary black social plight and raises consciousness with regards to cultural roots. He establishes a strong African American persona that subsists upon a solid African American background. In another sermon, “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool,” delivered the same year, he is even more explicit about the need of intragroup networking:

That's what we got to learn in the North: Negroes have to learn to stick together. We stuck together. [applause] We sent out the call and no Negro rode the buses. It was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen in my life (par. 35).

His racial pride rests upon the ability to remind fellow African Americans of events in their communicative memory which prove performative of African American salience despite more distant and immediate traumatic experiences. The success of direct action facilitates self-face movement in that it works toward lessening anxiety and uncertainty as well as strengthening intragroup ties.

In this way, accommodative tactics do not only serve to negotiate a new position with the white outgroup, but also to upgrade and revalue African American cultural core and thus African American self-face. Increasing visibility has thus the dual function to both display significant presence before the outgroup and to enable ingroup members to decrease uncertainty stemming from the feeling of being underrepresented in numbers. The latter comes to the foreground in Elijah Muhammad's separationist discourse as well when African Americans are presented as a community in "Help Self before Helping Others":

We are 20 million strong. Many of the nations today that have their independence, and those who are getting their independence, are much smaller in number than my people in America (1965: 35).

Another instance emerges exemplified by Muhammad's convert, Malcolm X in "Open Mind Round Table" in 1961 in which he performs significance by numbers by referring to the relevance of Islam and connecting "dark people" across the Atlantic:

It's Islam, and that religion is practiced by 725 million non-white people in Africa and in Asia. I think it's absurd to connect us with any one geographic area when the Muslim world stretches from China right up to the shores of West Africa. Everyone in the Muslim world is our brother and we are brothers to them and considered brothers by them.

The same idea is also exploited by King when he is remindful of blacks' exclusion from white churches in "A Knock at Midnight":

Millions of Africans, patiently knocking on the door of the Christian church where they seek the bread of social justice, have either been altogether ignored or told to wait until later, which almost always means never. Millions of American Negroes, starving for the want of the bread of freedom, have knocked again and again on the door of so-called white churches, but they have usually been greeted by a cold indifference or a blatant hypocrisy (par. 15).

While King identifies the black community in contrast to the discriminatory practice of white churches and communicatively, in this way, he does not seek to accommodate the white community; he does illuminate ingroup

strength by numbers and fosters ingroup ties through comparison by contrast. “Patiently knocking” yet reveals his ultimately accommodative orientation, along with demonstrating a positive self-face.

Positive self-face movement enables to position the black self as a moral force, endowing the respective speaker and his adherents with the quality of educating others. As King expresses it in his “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”:

With understanding goodwill, you are obligated to seek to change their attitudes. Let them know that in standing against integration, they are not only standing against the noble precepts of your democracy, but also against the eternal edicts of God himself (par. 17).

An even more powerful example is provided by King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), which is written in response to eight white clergymen’s dismissing the demonstrations in Birmingham as “unwise and untimely,” “incit[ing] to hatred and violence,” as well as commending the police “on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled” (Carpenter 1963). Even though his political strategy is in Birmingham to “create a ‘climate of collapse’ that undermined faith in the state and its conduct” (William M. King 1986: 4), and, as Charles P. Henry proposes, the change from “non-violent persuasion to coercive non-violence” means for King to be “less intent on winning the love of the oppressor than pressuring liberal whites in the North to support and defend liberal black demands” (1987: 337); from a communicative point of view, he presents himself as an edifier, who seeks to gain advantage through reminding the white clergy of their duties, thus, in terms of accommodation, through confronting them aggressively. In fact, addressing them “in dozens of voices—[he] begged, scolded, explained, even cooed to them, and conspired icily with them as fellow experts” (Branch 1998: 47), he seeks to admonish them: “I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen [. . .] if you were to watch them push and curse [. . .] slap and kick old Negro men and young boys” (2003: 45). While the many voices he employs reveal his undisguised disappointment for “justice too long delayed is justice denied” (2003: 37), he in fact exhorts the white clergy to live up to their Christian calling and to the ideals of the American dream: “Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood” (2003: 40)—that in terms of cocultural communication means “true intergroup, interpersonal living [and] the mutual sharing of power” (Cruse 1993: 239).

King’s tactics shows that despite his harsh criticism with which he confronts his intended audience he seeks convergence and not divergence. His aim is both “to facilitate comprehension” (Gallois 2005: 126) and, from the point of view of identity maintenance, “to appear more similar and thus

more likeable” (Gallois 2005: 126)—both functions of communication accommodation. Confrontation serves the specific role to facilitate “constructive non-violent tension [. . .] necessary for growth” (King 2003: 36), and instead of provocation the direct action protests serve purposes of cooperation. Regarding the affective function, King literally places himself in the center when he explains, “I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the ‘do-nothingism’ of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist” (2003: 41).

Deconstructing stereotypes comes to the foreground as a further major strand in accentuating group cohesion. While negative stereotypes can serve as a means to attack ingroup members—as, for example, it is the case with Black Muslims’ accusing black Christians of Uncle Tomism and vice versa King dismissing Malcolm X as “crazy,” “tragic,” “irresponsible,” or “demagogic” (see Baldwin and Al-Hadid 2002: 104)—dispelling them can have a revitalizing effect and construct positive self-face. It is the case with King when he criticizes unprogressive practices of African American churches in “A Knock at Midnight” that enable false images about the black community and its needs:

Two types of Negro churches have failed to provide bread. One burns with emotionalism, and the other freezes with classism. The former, reducing worship to entertainment, places more emphasis on volume than on content and confuses spirituality with muscularity. The danger in such a church is that the members may have more religion in their hands and feet than in their hearts and souls. At midnight this type of church has neither the vitality nor the relevant gospel to feed hungry souls.

The other type of Negro church that feeds no midnight traveller has developed a class system and boasts of its dignity, its membership of professional people, and its exclusiveness (par. 20).

Even though King acknowledges the presence of congregations like these, by claiming elsewhere that “monkeys are to entertain, not preachers” (“Guidelines”: par. 4), he nevertheless creates a distance between himself and them. He derives new strength from dismissing the autostereotypes and renews the ground for uniting with the African American community. In this view of the black church—an autostereotype in contrast to white churches—he formulates a vision of the Christian church in “Guidelines for a Constructive Church”:

It seems that I can hear the God of the universe smiling and speaking to this church, saying, “You are a great church (Glory to God) because I was hungry and ye fed me. You are a great church because I was naked and ye clothed me. You are a great church because I was sick and ye visited me. You are a great church because I was in prison and ye gave me consolation by visiting me.” (Yes, sir) And this is the church that’s going to save this world (par. 37).

Paraphrasing Matthew 25, King endows the church with a dual meaning—the body of Christ including all races and ethnicities as well as the black church encompassing rhetorically the African American community. The move serves the dual role of self-positioning as a moral community and criticizing both black and white churches with scriptural background.

Communication accommodation involves then sometimes intersecting processes of either convergence, divergence, or maintenance—three strategies of communication accommodation theory (CAT). CAT evolves around the idea that speakers change the style of their communication in order to effect “positive personal and social identities” (Gallois 2005: 123). In this scheme, convergence pertains to a strategic process, whereby the speaker changes his/her communication style, involving all linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of communication, in order to be accepted by the other party. As Cyndy Gallois defines it, speakers “desire recipients’ approval” (2005: 126) and therefore “adapt their communicative behavior in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor’s behavior” (2005: 123). In contrast to convergence, divergence represents an oppositional process in that speakers do not seek to conform to the communication style of their partners, but it is the “accentuation of differences between self and other” (2005: 123) that becomes relevant. Concomitantly, the oppositional direction also reveals orientation toward the ingroup, African Americans in this case, as speakers “desire positive ingroup identity” (2005: 126). Gallois et al make a further differentiation by establishing the category of maintenance to refer to the possibility that speakers may not want to change their communication strategy, i.e., neither toward the outgroup, nor the ingroup. In their interpretation, here “a person persists in his or her original style, regardless of the communication behavior of the interlocutor” (2005: 123). The outcome is, on the one hand, that, on a cognitive level, the strategy serves “to remind [. . .] of nonshared group membership and hence prevent misattributions” (2005: 126), which may include non-membership in both in- and outgroup; on the other, as an affective function it yet has the role “to emphasize distinctiveness” (2005: 126). It is for the latter feature that Gallois et al do not treat maintenance and divergence further as different communication strategies.

The strategies do not form clear-cut categories in an interaction in the case of the religious leaders. As group representatives, both the Christian and Black Muslim leaders need to speak in multiple directions—as “multiple conversations [. . .] are occurring in each moment” (Pearce 2005: 46)²—which influences the magnitude of their original strategy, be it conver-

² Pearce’s daisy model signifies a tool of CMM (Coordinated Management of Meaning) to show in a palpable way that a conversation between two people is often influenced by others not present. It mainly refers to the different identity segments of the speakers shaping their conversation styles and goals and/thus the vortex of discourses present in an interaction.

gence or divergence. This also explains why an overaccommodative stand cannot be maintained either, as it would largely equal pursuing assimilationist goals. It often happens that segments of both convergence and divergence can be detected in the speeches. In “Paul’s Letter to American Christians” delivered to the Commission on Ecumenical Missions and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church in 1958, King shows segments of both strategies, while maintaining the overall objective of integration:

In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. With this attitude you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards (par. 19).

King may appear to adopt a strategy of divergence as difference rather than similarity is emphasized by words like “oppressor” or “debilitate” and the sentence he passes on white Christians holding them responsible for the injustices committed against African Americans. At the same time, he also expresses moderation and voices a promise not to become aggressors against whites. In fact, he involves rather than estranges whites by inviting them also to live up to their potential and join African Americans in their struggle.

The separatist views of Black Muslims generally invite a view of their communication that is primarily considered estranging, or, in terms of communication accommodation, divergent. Malcolm X’s early speeches support this view in many instances, as especially in interviews with whites, he upholds his Black Muslim face (as Muhammad’s right hand in that phase of his life) but even dissociates with other black community members, most notably the civil rights leadership. Following his *hajj* to Mecca in 1965, his communication changes and shows more instances of convergence than divergence.

With a strong opposition to white America, Black Muslim co-cultural communication with respect to accommodation involves attempts to establish and strengthen intragroup ties and thereby to adjust face movements. Elijah Muhammad’s striving is precipitated in this direction throughout his lifework, as he tries to attract African Americans, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Besides building up a strong and distinctive Black Muslim self-face in opposition to whites, which pushes him toward a separationist co-cultural position; he also addresses the larger African American community in an attempt to raise their consciousness in “Civilized Man”:

The so-called Negroes must be truly civilized, and the right civilized man has not performed his duty until this is accomplished. However, the so-called Negro is free to receive his or her own if they just will not allow fear and ignorance to stand in their way. It has been seen from the little chance they had to get a little education—they have

shown and proved that they are the original people who are only asleep and in great need of the right civilized man who will perform his duty of awakening them (1965: 45).

The “critical pedagogy” (Pitre 2010: 40) Muhammad proposes serves to educate others—as shown above, a co-cultural strategy of accommodation—though not whites, but fellow blacks in order to “challenge[] the foundation of the White supremacist construction of Black education” (40). Muhammad’s strategy emanates from the fact that, as Abul Pitre observes,

Blacks are being schooled as opposed to being educated. [as] The schooling process of Black people in America is not educating the genetic power that lies dormant within the individual because the schooling process put to death the creative power of the self (2010: 40).

Malcolm X echoes Muhammad’s view until his turn to Sunni Islam, when his communication is modified to become more convergent. Tainted with Pan-Africanist ideas, Malcolm X growingly insists on intragroup ties:

Have you ever seen first dark lie down across the lake and what about some nights some slow jazz slipped straight from the radio. I want to talk about things worthy of praise, the fact that somewhere underneath all these colors we are capable of saying yes to each other. Your newspapers just want a boogie man to slap on the front page. I want to talk about what is sacred, how in the Holy Land I pulled the breath of Allah into my lungs, how this made me want to laugh and embrace anyone, how I want my people to know their skin unbruised as it had been once early in the world (Seibles 1993: 504).

He utilizes liaisons by seeking not only to incorporate African Americans, but also to embrace Africans in Africa. Pluralism takes the place of separation in his interracial communication as he “retreat[s] from the impossible position of separation. Blacks cannot be separate in the United States, but they can be functionally plural” (Cruse 1993: 252). In a more accommodative mode, he continues communicating a strong Black Muslim self, however, he also foresees cooperation that he categorically precludes previously: “working separately, the sincere white people and sincere black people actually will be working together” (Haley 1965: 384). From conveying aggressive separation he moves toward aggressive accommodation whereby he places strong “emphasis upon black solidarity, pride, and self-determination” (Findlay 1993: 209).

The idea of self-help in Vernon Johns’s “A Negro Agrarian Culture” delineates the same intragroup orientation as the views of the separationist Elijah Muhammad in this respect:

Anyone with eyes to see understands that the Negro must build up a civilization of his own in the American nation. He need not expect to be merged in the whole. Other races are pronounced in their refusal to work, play, or pray with him, and these activities about comprehend the whole of life. We must found our own culture—we must find the way to sustain our bodies and enrich our society (1977: 136).

The anti-urban, or perhaps, anti-modern sentiment urges African Americans to turn their back on the filth of the cities toward self-help and “to pioneer behind the frontiers” (1977: 136), i.e., to build up themselves as a separate community. The economic self-sustainability and to cluster culturally as a people does not mean physical separation unlike Muhammad’s philosophy: Johns means it as a preparation for a successful return to multicultural America. His closing sentence reveals, “He [i.e., blacks] must yet do his turn at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock before he can come triumphantly through the din, stampede, and competitive struggle of the Metropolis” (1977: 136). As a means of education and successful integration, he suggests that African Americans need to go through the same process the history of America delineates, i.e., from the rural life of settlers to urbanization. His optimism does not rely on assimilationist goals but on finding an authentic black self, but that within the American nation. In fact, his vision can be traced back to ideas of the American dream. When he claims that “the country is young with promise and we are young” (1977: 136), Johns embraces the very American ideal of self-realization and positions blacks in the texture of nation-building. The juxtaposition of African Americans with white America implies both granting and claiming space in his communication—an attuning strategy serving to build mutual face (see Giles 1991: 41).

Accommodative techniques prove most revealing regarding cultural projection and implosion pertaining to intercultural negotiations. Accommodation posits an African American cultural core that is reasserted in intercultural interaction. Communicating from a distinct subject position, the speakers seek to establish alliances through convergence toward other cultural groups. Black Christian leaders converge to both to the ingroup and outgroup in their communication, while Black Muslims show a tendency of divergence away from opposing cultural groups, including Christian ingroup members, and converge to the own ingroup and groups (establishing, e.g., Pan-African ties) that may substantiate their cultural projection.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, L. V. and A. Y. Al-Hadid.: *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002.
- Branch, T.: *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

- Carpenter, Ch. et al.: "White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations." *The Birmingham News* 13 Apr.1963. Birmingham Public Library Digital Collections: https://server16044.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISO_ROOT=/p4017coll2&CISOPTTR=746&CISOBOX=1&REC=9, 19 May 2015.
- Cruse, H.: *Plural but Equal*. New York: William Morrow, 1987.
- Findlay, J.: *Church People in the Struggle*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Gallois, C., T. Ogay, and H. Giles.: Communication Accommodation Theory: A look Back and a Look Ahead. In: Gudykunst, W. B. (Ed.): *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005, 121–48.
- Giles, H., J. Coupland, and N. Coupland.: Accommodation Theory: Communication, Context, and Consequence. In: Giles, H., Coupland, J., and Coupland, N. (Eds.): *Contexts of Accommodation: Developments in Applied Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, 1-69.
- Gilroy, P.: *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London and New York: Verso, 1993.
- Haley, A.: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965.
- Hall, J. C.: *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Heath, R. L. and B. Jennings.: *Human Communication Theory and Research: Concepts, Contexts, and Challenges*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.
- Henry, Ch. P.: Delivering Daniel: The Dialectic of Ideology in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. *Journal of Black Studies* 17.3 (March 1987), 327-45.
- Johns, V. A Negro Agrarian Culture. In: Gandy S. L. (Ed.): *Human Possibilities: A Vernon Johns Reader*. Washington: Hoffman, 1977, 129-36.
- King, M. L., Jr. "A Knock at Midnight." *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. The King Institute: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_a_knock_at_midnight.1.html, 19 May 2015.
- . "Guidelines for a Constructive Church." *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. The King Institute: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_guidelines_for_a_constructive_church.1.html, 19 May 2015.

- . "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*. Ed. Joy James. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. 34-48.
- . "Paul's Letter to American Christians." *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. The King Institute: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_pauls_letter_to_american_christians.1.html, 19 May 2015.
- . "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. The King Institute: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_three_dimensions_of_a_complete_life.1.html, 19 May 2015.
- . "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool." *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*. The King Institute: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_why_jesus_called_a_man_a_fool.1.html, 19 May 2015.
- King, W. M.: The Re-emerging Revolutionary Consciousness of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1965-1968. *Journal of Negro History* 71.1/4 (Winter-Autumn, 1986), 1-22.
- Muhammad, E.: Help Self before Helping Others. In: *Message to the Black Man in America*. Phoenix: MEMPS, 1965, 35-37.
- . If The Civilized Man Fails To Perform His Duty What Must Be Done? *Message to the Black Man in America*. Phoenix: MEMPS, 1965, 44-46.
- Malcolm X. A Message to the Grassroots. In: *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*. New York: Grove P, 1965, 3-18.
- . "Open Mind Round Table." *Educate Corner*: <http://www.educatecorner.com/harvard-university/videos/open-mind-round-table-with-malcolm-x-james-farmer-wyatt-t-walker-alan-morrison-mpg-watch-bDljbFBkdD15Mnc.html>, 12 Jan. 2015.
- Pearce, W. B.: The Coordinated Management of Meaning. In: Gudykunst, W. B. (Ed.): *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*. Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005, 35-54.
- Pitre, A.: *An Introduction to Elijah Muhammad Studies: The New Educational Paradigm*. Lanham, Maryland: UP of America, 2010.
- Seibles, T.: Outtakes from an Interview with Malcolm X after Mecca: January 1965. *Callaloo* 16.3 (Summer 1993), 501-5.