

John Africa and the MOVE Organization

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Between 1965 and 1972, American focus was dominated by an unpopular war, new music, and the emergence of black power groups aiming to find equality in a country that refused to give equal rights to everyone. From this time period came people and groups, such as Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, whose main objective was to protect black families and interests through any means necessary.

Lost in the confusion of the time was a small group in Philadelphia called MOVE, whose members “adopted a back-to-nature lifestyle and who protested what they considered to be the profanities of modern society” (Dickson). American memory glosses over the memory of move for multiple reasons, including the fact that MOVE’s ideology did not intersect with those of other black power groups and because they did not have a big, national showdown with a federal agency.

It is difficult to identify the moment at which MOVE was officially created, but it is clear that the philosophy behind the group comes from a man named John Africa. Africa was born with the name Vincent Leaphart, but changed his name to John Africa in 1972 to represent the continent where life began. Africa struggled with his education throughout his childhood, eventually being labeled as “mentally retarded” and functionally illiterate (McCoy). In spite of this, John Africa managed to attract a number of people from the Philadelphia area who were willing to believe in his ideologies. One of these disciples of John Africa was Donald Glassey, a graduate of the nearby University of Pennsylvania. Glassey was so fascinated by Africa’s teachings that he volunteered to write and compile Africa’s thoughts into a book. It is apparent that many black rights groups and people gained acclaim and followers through the dissemination of literature, such as Gill Scott’s poetry or the Chapel Hill protest pamphlets. John Africa was tragically killed when the Philadelphia police department dropped a bomb on the MOVE household, killing John Africa along with five other adults and five children. The clash between the MOVE organization and the Philadelphia police is similar to many other clashes during the black power movement, such as the Watts riots in Los Angeles.

MOVE’s doctrine relied on the “ideal that any religion or philosophy that prevents adherents from actively opposing exploitations and oppression was useless” (Floyd-Thomas). In this way, MOVE can be linked to other black power groups of the day; however, MOVE separates itself from other groups through how it chose to go about their objective. MOVE attempted to attack the American hegemonic memory by focusing on protest and activism in black culture.

I believe that MOVE is an important organization because it gives people another perception of how black activist groups worked in American society. Unlike the Black Panther Party, MOVE did not seem to care about indoctrinating as many people as possible. Instead, they let people with similar views come and join their community. It did not matter to John Africa whether the people joining him were black or white, he just wanted to create a community who stood up for what is right. In addition to his drive to find good people, John Africa also recognized that he had a duty to revolt when he recognized that the needs of some people were not being met. In a letter to the editor of the Philadelphia Tribune, Africa says “isn’t it correct to rebel against a system eating us, enslaving us, killing us?”(Abu-Jamal). In this quote, Africa reminds us of how our country was founded on the principle that people have a right to protest in the event they are not being represented. This notion adds credibility and historical precedent to his protest.

Within his organization, John Africa’s memory has been sanctified and John Africa himself has been apotheosized. Looking at their website, you can easily see how the remaining members of MOVE have intentionally capitalized every use of Africa’s name. The website even capitalizes the word “He”, a sign of reverence usually reserved by Christians for their God. To the MOVE organization, John Africa’s memory is more than just a man, it is an ideal and a way of life that was attacked and suppressed. They have raised him up in this way in the hopes of remembering the values for which he fought.

Some people say that MOVE is an incredibly dense and difficult organization to interact with, leading to their alienation from other civil rights groups. However, I believe that MOVE is just a group of people who are dedicated to their cause. They believe that all life is sacred and they are willing to stand up and fight those who disagree. John Africa’s legacy in this organization carries on through today and his writings continue to guide the organization’s philosophy. Though the work and philosophy that MOVE advocates for may not be central in American memory and consciousness, it is important to remember that they fight for those who do not have a voice in order to bring about equality.

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