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# Bogus court filings spotlight little-known sect

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RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — From New Jersey to California, police, courthouse officials and real estate agents are being confronted with a baffling new problem: bogus legal documents filed by people claiming to follow an obscure religion called Moorish Science. Their motives range from financial gain to simply causing a nuisance.

No one is more exasperated by the phenomenon than the leaders of the century-old Moorish Science Temple of America, who say the growing crop of "paperwork terrorists" has nothing to do with their faith or its teachings.

"It's just distressing that some individuals would take something as pure and righteous as this organization and try to tarnish it," said Christopher Bennett-Bey, grand sheikh of the group's temple in Charlotte, one of more than 30 located around the country.

By Chuck Burton, AP

Christopher Bennett-Bey, grand sheikh of the Charlotte temple of the Moorish Science Temple of America is raising the groups profile in an effort to counteract what they say has been a rampant hijacking of their faith's name and symbols by radicals who have nothing to do with the group's nearly century-old traditions.

It's not clear why the flimflam artists are invoking the group. But one expert said divisions dating back to the death of the sect's founder have resulted in small pockets of people who claim to be followers but have little understanding of the faith.

The bad filings include deeds, liens and other documents, often written in confusing pseudo-legal jargon and making outlandish claims about being exempt from U.S. law. In some cases, filers have actually moved into foreclosed houses and changed the locks. Other times, people seeking to slip their mortgages have used bogus documents to waste the time and money of their banks. Fake liens have also been maliciously filed to target enemies.

"The ideas are particularly attractive to people who are hurting economically, although let's be candid: For some people it's just pure greed," said Mark Potok, director of the Intelligence Project for the Southern Poverty Law

Center in Montgomery, Ala.

Law enforcement can pursue theft or fraud charges if a case warrants it, but states' laws vary on whether filing sham paperwork is a crime in itself. Lawmakers in North Carolina failed to pass a law making bad filings a crime this year.

National numbers on the scheme aren't available, but the area around the largest city in North Carolina has been a hot spot. In 2011 alone, more than 200 bogus legal documents have been filed with Mecklenburg County by people claiming to be followers of Moorish Science, with another few dozen in neighboring Union County.

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As long as a legal document is properly formatted, county officials have to file it alongside valid paperwork, according to Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds David Granberry. The content, however, is often outlandish and includes strange punctuation and capitalization or lengthy digressions about the 14th Amendment, the Constitution or maritime law.

"If we can legally reject it for some reason, we'll do that. But as soon as they figure out how to correct it, we'll get a stream of these documents because word gets around," he said.

Having a bogus lien or deed legally purged requires the county — or the subject of the lien — to go through a potentially lengthy process that often involves hiring lawyers. A document with a \$50 filing fee can easily end up costing the county \$2,000, Granberry said.

The tactics being used by the Moor impostors originated with tax-dodgers and white supremacist groups in the 1980s, experts said.

"These are people who engage in the most bizarre leaps of logic. They literally believe that if you lowercase the 'u' in the phrase [United States](#), you will break the bonds of government tyranny and become a free man," said Potok, the expert with the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The occupation of foreclosed homes appears to be a new wrinkle, Potok said. Such cases have been recorded in Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina, California and elsewhere. They often end in the arrests of the squatters.

Joe Pipitone, a realtor in Vineland, N.J., encountered the problem earlier this year. After selling a home that had been foreclosed on, he got a call from the new owner to say that someone was already living in the \$300,000 house. Pipitone was baffled to find that a deed had been filed claiming ownership by a woman saying she was a member of the Moorish Science Temple. Police said the woman, who was arrested and held on \$85,000 bond, had changed the locks and put the utilities in her name.

"I've been selling real estate for 15 years, and I've never seen anything like this," Pipitone said. "You'd think nobody would be stupid enough to try something like this."

Leaders of the largest Moorish Science group are baffled by the tactic.

"I don't understand the underlying motive," Bennett-Bey said. "I think it's just out of convenience, or they're looking for some status."

Moorish Science followers trace their faith back to 1913 and revere its founder, North Carolina native Timothy Drew, as a prophet. They call him the Noble Drew Ali. The faith blends aspects of Islam with elements of other faiths and philosophies, and has its own scriptures, generally called the [Holy Koran](#) or the Circle 7 Koran. The Moorish Science Temple taught that the people called blacks were actually the descendants of "Asiatic Moors" or Moroccans who had been in [North America](#) for hundreds of years.

Establishing a base in Chicago, the group aimed to instill a sense of pride in its members, decked out in fezzes and bearing identity cards proclaiming "I am a citizen of the USA!" at a time when blacks were legally relegated to second-class status. To make an explicit link with their proclaimed Moorish heritage, members of the group added "Bey" or "El" to their names. At its height, tens of thousands of people belonged to the organization.

"The Moorish Science of Temple of America was founded for the express purpose of uplifting fallen humanity," said Azeem Hopkins-Bey, the group's national spokesman. "We teach that our members must learn to love instead of hate."

After Ali's death in 1929, the group suffered a number of schisms and lost followers to groups that included the [Nation of Islam](#).

Today, numerous groups claim affiliation with Moorish Science. Some consist only a handful of members and in many cases have little understanding of the faith, said Spencer

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Dew, a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

"There are folks who call themselves Moors or Moes without knowing anything about the history of Moorish Science," said Dew, who teaches a summer class for the [Chicago Police Department](#) on religious groups and crime.

The Moorish Science Temple of America is working to distance itself from the people filing bogus legal claims, calling them "radical and subversive fringe groups" in a recent statement. Moorish leaders are looking into legal remedies, and Bennett-Bey has been advising authorities on how to distinguish registered members from impostors.

"It's like coming to this country and saying you're an American citizen," he said. "If you haven't gone through the process and gotten the proper documentation, you can call yourself whatever you want, but that doesn't make it true."

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