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From Shabazz to Bilalian: African American Muslims Experience in the Twentieth Century

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**From Shabazz to Bilalian:
African American Muslims' Experience in Twentieth Century**

by
Semra Mese

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
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From Shabazz to Bilalian: African American Muslims' Experience in Twentieth Century

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Abstract

African American Muslims form the highest percentage of all American Muslims. Islam, nevertheless, has not been any new phenomenon for African Americans. Starting from the Moorish Science Temple, African Americans have been introduced to Islam through different movements. Among them, the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam and American Society of Muslims are the most influential ones.

Starting from early twentieth century, I examine how African Americans were introduced to Islam and how they created an “Islam” to fulfill their religio-political purposes. Also, the transition from Black Muslims to Sunni Muslims is examined. This thesis also examines the history of some African American movements and brings some sociological and religious perspectives on how people or groups can appropriate religion and particularly Islam in order to gain recognition and respect.

This study importantly seeks to understand how conversion of African Americans to Sunni Islam has been contributory to their ethnic, political and social identity through analyzing twenty-one conversion narratives and stories and significant results have been obtained based on the analysis of these narratives and stories.

Chapter 1

The Creation and Appropriation of Islam among African Americans in the Twentieth Century

A. Introduction

World War I and the Depression aggravated dissatisfaction and disappointment among African Americans, who were trying hard to find a place within the capitalist and predominantly white society in the America of the early twentieth century. Economically and politically deprived, African Americans faced unbearable conditions. These conditions caused the Great Migration, which identifies the migration of over one million blacks migrated from South to North during 1916 and 1930.¹ Following World War I, race riots also erupted throughout America. As it was already the post-war era, economic and social conditions were changing for the whites as well. Blacks who migrated to the North were expecting their life to change for the better. However, contrary to their expectations, their conditions became worse than even those they had experienced in the South.²

Various political, social and economic conditions led to the Great Migration, which reached its peak from 1916 to 1918. It is estimated that 300,000 blacks moved from the South to the North during this time period because they were economically repressed in the South and they were politically powerless and socially segregated.³ On the other hand, in the north, the need for the production of munitions and military goods due to the World War I led to a rapid increase in heavy industry. This caused an increase in the demand of both semi-skilled and unskilled black laborers. Blacks in the South were recruited for this kind of labor and began migrating to the North in order to be employed

in the heavy industry.⁴ Socially, however, African Americans moved from the racism of the South to the racism of the North. They lived in the slums of the Northern cities. Yet this led them to be more together with those whom they were on the same wavelength and of the same mind and also to build relationships with other African Americans.⁵

According to Clifton E. Marsh, the black population increased in northern states after the migration. For example, in 1910 New York had a total of 91,709 black residents and it increased to 152,467 with a 66.3 percent increase in ten years. Chicago, Illinois in 1910 had 44,103 black residents and that population increased to 109,458 with a 148.2 percent increase by 1920. Detroit, Michigan in 1910 was home to only 5,471 black residents but in 1920, because of the automobile industry labor demand, the black population had swelled to 40,838.⁶

The main objective of African Americans migrating North was to look for better job opportunities in the war-inflated economy.⁷ As expected, black employment rose. African Americans were often employed in agriculture, in domestic and personal services, and, importantly, in the manufacturing and mechanical industries. However, when the World War I ended, returning soldiers sought employment thereby causing blacks to lose their jobs.⁸

B. The Root of Islam for Black Islamic Movements in the United States for Twentieth Century African Americans

Richard Brent Turner asserts that the ideological roots of Islam in the United States in twentieth century date back to nineteenth century Pan-Africanist Edward Wilmot Blyden. Turner notes the connection between “Black Nationalism” and its concomitant “Pan-Africanism” and argues that Pan-Africanism became a transitional

religion between the religion of African slaves and the Islam of the twentieth century African American. Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), known as “the father of Pan-Africanism,” undeniably plays an important role in this transition.⁹ Blyden was a West Indian working for Presbyterian Church. He was a black Christian missionary and was assigned to teach Biblical scriptures in Arabic to Africans. As it was the aim of Christian missionaries at the time, he worked to bring “Christian civilization” to the “dark continent” of Africa.¹⁰ Conversely, his missionary work in Africa led him to appreciate Islam in West Africa, which, he thought, helped shape native Africans into self-reliant and respected peoples.

Black Nationalists in the nineteenth century intended to “unify politically all [black] peoples whether they are residents of African territories or descendants of those Africans who were dispersed by the slave trade,” and Black Nationalism “seeks to unite the entire black racial family, assuming the entire race has a collective destiny and message for humanity comparable to that of a nation.” Concurrent with Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism emerged as “a movement toward economic cooperation, cultural awareness, and international political solidarity among people of African descent.”¹¹

The influence that Blyden exerted as a Pan-Africanist on Black American “Islamizers” in the twentieth century is evident. He suggested the model of Islam in West Africa as a remedy for the racial separatism and identity.¹² Twentieth century’s black leaders took his suggestion of this nineteenth century example seriously. Turner notes that Islam as an exemplar influenced black American Islamists such as Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad.¹³

To illustrate the point above, the founder of the Moorish Science Temple, Noble Drew Ali, claimed the idea that there were a series of people who were of Asiatic origins, namely, Egyptians, Arabians, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, the people of South America and Central America, Turks, and African Americans. Turner states that that is why the Moorish Science Temple is Pan-Africanist in its aim to bring together people of color in Asia and Africa. The Pan-Islamic movement asserted Islam as the inherent religion of Asiatic people.¹⁴

For our purposes, Blyden's comment is worth considering: "While [Islam] brought [Africans] a great deal that was absolutely new, and inspired them with spiritual feelings to which they had been utter strangers, it strengthened and hastened certain tendencies to independence and self-reliance which were already at work."¹⁵ Turner sums up Blyden's objectives, as he suggested Islam in preference to Christianity, in terms of the lack of racial prejudice and the merit of brotherhood in Islam.¹⁶ "[The Mohammedan religion] extinguishes all distinctions founded upon race, colour, or nationality." Blyden backs up his point with a *hadith* (saying) of the Prophet Muhammad who said, "I admonish you to fear God, and yield obedience to my successor, although he may be a black slave."¹⁷ Also, Blyden suggests: "Islam was the only major world religion in which black people had historically been able to maintain social, cultural, political and economic autonomy."¹⁸ On the other hand, he states that even though West Africans got to know about Christianity for three hundred years, "not one single tribe, *as a tribe*, has yet become Christian."¹⁹

In order to further clarify how and why Blyden might exerted influence on twentieth century Black "Islamizers", particularly on Noble Drew Ali and Elijah

Muhammad, more needs to be said about Blyden and his approach to Islam in the West Africa. In an important manner, Blyden used details and examples to explain in his book *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* how Islam brought deference and development to the continent. For example, he states: “The Koran is, in its measure, an important educator. It exerts among a primitive people a wonderful influence. It has furnished to the adherent of its teachings in Africa a ground of union which has contributed vastly to their progress.”²⁰ Also, he makes a critique of black people in Christian lands and in Muslim states in Africa. He believes:

Wherever the Negro is found in Christian lands, his leading trait is not docility, as has been often alleged, but servility. He is slow and unprogressive [...] On the other hand, there are numerous Negro Mohammedan communities and states in Africa which are self-reliant, productive, independent, and dominant, supporting, without the countenance or patronage of the parent country, Arabia, whence they derived them, their political, literary, and ecclesiastical institutions.²¹

As related to the point of Christian colonization, which left Africans in destitute, Blyden states:

Mohammadenism, in Africa, has left the native master of himself and of his home; but wherever Christianity has been able to establish itself, with the exception of Liberia, foreigners have taken the possession of the country, and, in some places, rule the natives with oppressive rigour.²²

Blyden continues that color and race are not barriers to gain privileges in Islam. He relates this point to Bilal ibn Rabah, the first *Muezzin* (Crier). He states that the first *Azan* (call to prayer), which Muslims chant before each of five *salats* was first uttered by Bilal, who, as one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, clung to Islam even under severest trials.²³ Blyden states that Prophet Muhammad “gave [Bilal] precedence over himself in Paradise” and then quotes another saying of the Prophet Muhammad

about Bilal ibn Rabah (also known as Bilal-i Habeshi among Muslims): “On one occasion, the Prophet said to Bilal, at the time of the morning prayer, “O Bilal, tell me an act of yours from which you had the greatest hopes; because, I heard the noise of your shoes in front of me in Paradise, in the night of ascension.”²⁴ (Mischat-ul Masabih; vol.i, p. 285)

Aside from the assertions of Edward Blyden in the nineteenth century who “praised Islam, and the Qur’an, and West African Muslim society as effective vehicles of modern black manhood and nationalism,” foreign Muslim missionaries in the United States in the 1920s advocated the idea that Islam contributes to black identity. Among those Muslim missionaries, the Ahmadiyya movement missionaries were the most influential and they recruited many African Americans to Islam.²⁵

Ghulam Ahmad established the Ahmadiyya movement in India in 1889. The main objective of the movement was to revive Islam; therefore, the followers of Ghulam Ahmad believed that Ahmad was a *mujaddid* (reviver); however, some of the followers went even farther to claim that Ghulam Ahmad was the Islamic Mahdi and the Christian Messiah.²⁶

The Ahmadis began their teachings in Detroit. They then discovered “their teachings appealed less to whites than to African Americans.”²⁷ For example, according to Edward Curtis, Muhammad Sadiq, an Ahmadi missionary, recruited some African Americans to Islam by focusing the idea that “they would experience true brotherhood and equality in Islam.” Sadiq also told African Americans that many of them had been Muslims before they were brought to the Americas and forced to forget their religion.

Thus, Sadiq recruited African Americans to claim ownership for their lost or stolen religious heritage.²⁸

Based upon this information, Curtis states that it is possible that W. D. Fard might have been influenced by the teachings of the Ahmadiyya movement. Certainly Elijah Muhammad was, because Elijah and some members of the Nation of Islam often quoted from the Ahmadiyya literature.²⁹

Curtis asserts that the Ahmadiyya movement exerted an undeniable influence on African Americans in the 1920s, The Ahmadis promoted Islam as the religion of the enslaved ancestors of African Americans. They also promoted Islam as “a religion which teaches manliness, self-reliance, self-respect, and self-effort,” and also as “the real faith of universal brotherhood which at once does away with all distinctions of race, color, and creed.”³⁰

According to Curtis, contact with foreign immigrant Islamic groups affected how African Americans interpreted Islam from 1970s until today. He further links his point to the fact that owing to these contacts and confrontations with immigrant groups in 1970s, Elijah Muhammad’s son, W. D. Muhammad, recruited African Americans to follow Sunni Islam. It was W. D. Muhammad who shifted the teachings of the Nation of Islam to orthodox Sunni Islam and changed the Nation of Islam to the World Community of Al-Islam in the West.³¹

C. The Spread of Islam among African Americans: The History of the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims

Clifton E. Marsh argues that for African Americans the first half of twentieth century was a period of subjugation, unequal opportunities and exploitation. Living in

segregated communities, millions of blacks were jobless. In order to be successful, they had to organize a “collective movement,” and one of the most important of the movements was The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. These movements were created to form group solidarity and emphasize the proud heritage of African Americans who had so long been degraded, exploited and cast off from social, political and economic life in the United States. African Americans were seeking to gain the recognition they had been deprived of by the white society. In order to achieve this, one of the methods that the Nation of Islam pursued was “black nationalism,” which attempted to gather people of African descent together to overcome cultural, economic and political exploitation.³²

Jane I. Smith states the South at the time when the Moorish Science Temple was founded was a place of lynching and burning. Former slaves were looking for a place in American society but because of the economic and social problems they were experiencing they didn't feel they belonged in the society. Many Black Nationalist movements appeared in response to this feeling of dislocation and alienation, including Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple, which became the first black movement in America that used Islamic symbols.³³

Michael Gomez points out that Noble Drew Ali is the concomitant of what African Americans experienced during that time period. African Americans, Gomez writes, came out of slavery and were combating for their existence. Jim Crow laws were affecting them everywhere. They were subjected to lynching, and race riots broke out in various places. Southern blacks did not find what they had expected to find after

migrating to the North. They were neither accepted nor given a humane status in America, the country of their birth; in fact, “they had no country.”³⁴

For all these reasons, Black Nationalism became “an attractive alternative for African Americans.” The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam were founded during this period. African Americans who were migrating from South to North for an economically and socially better life found out that the North was not “the promised land” they had expected. Their disappointments were aggravated when World War I ended and many black workers lost their jobs. Noble Drew Ali and Wali Fard Muhammad emerged at this time, which was very conducive for a leader.³⁵

D. The Moorish Science Temple

Noble Drew Ali, whose original name was Timothy Drew, was born in North Carolina in 1886. Nothing certain is known about his origin. There are legends that say he was the son of the ex-slaves and grew up among Cherokee Indians. Another legend is that he was descended from Bilali Mohammed, an African Muslim slave who lived in Sapelo Island and where his descendants are still believed to live.³⁶

As the person who brought the first “Moorish community” into being in the United States, Noble Drew Ali founded a temple originally called the “Canaanite Temple,” and Drew Ali called himself the second prophet of Islam.³⁷ He founded many Moorish temples across North America. The aim of the Moorish Science Temple was to “uplift fallen humanity.”³⁸ Drew Ali’s primary message was that “salvation can be achieved only if blacks discard the various identities forced on them by whites in America, such as Negro or colored person, and understand that their true origin is

Asiatic.”³⁹ Although he became an influential leader, Abdul Wali Fard Muhammad later challenged his leadership in Newark.⁴⁰

The book that was used by the Moorish Science Temple was called *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America* but it has no bearing from the Qur’an of Islam. Gomez states that Noble Drew Ali’s teachings are a mixture of “Islam, Islamism, Freemasonry, New Thought, Rosicrucianism, anticolonialism, in its critique of European imperialism, and nationalism in the rejection of white American racism.”⁴¹ He claimed himself to be the prophet sent to the Asiatics of America--African Americans were believed to be Asiatics and their inherent religion was Islam. “I, the prophet, Noble Drew Ali, was sent by the Great God, Allah, to warn all Asiatics of America to repent from their sinful ways; before that great and awful day which is sure to come.”⁴² Based upon his readings of *Koran for Moorish Children* and the *Circle Seven Koran*, Gomez states that Noble Drew Ali, in addition to being a prophet, regarded himself as the reincarnation of Jesus and Muhammad.⁴³

According to the Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple in 1927, “[t]he Moorish who were ancient Moabites, and the founders of the Holy City of Mecca.”⁴⁴ “The Moabites from the land of Moab who received permission from the Pharaohs of Egypt to settle and inhabit North West Africa; they were the founders and are the true possessors of the present Moroccan Empire.”⁴⁵ “The inhabitants of the Africa are descendants of the ancient Canaanites from the land of Canaan.”⁴⁶ Drew Ali also taught:

That is why the nationality of the Moors was taken away from them in 1774 and the word negro, black and colored, was given to the Asiatics of America who were of Moorish descent, because they honored not the principles of their mother and father, and strayed after the gods of Europe of whom they knew nothing.⁴⁷

Smith states that Drew Ali's message was tempting to blacks that were deprived of economic and social opportunities as well as to those who were in the quest of an identity. Drew Ali's message was promised blacks a way to gain dignity and respect. By setting up some small economic foundations, his followers aimed to achieve economic independence because Drew Ali said once: "We shall be secure in nothing until we have economic power."⁴⁸

Gomez states that the reason why Noble Drew Ali was inspired to embrace Islam (despite his claim that Islam was a mixture of different belief systems) is "by no means as clear as the record of thousands of African Muslims who came to North America in chains, who struggled to maintain their faith against overwhelming odds, and who left their impressions, however imprecise, upon the sands of human hearts and memories."⁴⁹

Noble Drew Ali also provided his followers a national identity, a new religion, a flag (it was a Moorish flag), and "a transnational identity" shared with Asians (the members of the Moorish Science Temple called themselves as Asiatics).⁵⁰

E. The Nation of Islam

Wali Fard Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam in 1930 "during an era of hunger, discontent, anguish, and disillusionment in Detroit, Michigan."⁵¹ He was a peddler, which led him to go to people's houses and recruit for a religious separatist movement, which would be called the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam is often associated with North America since it emerged as a response to the difficulties African Americans experienced when they migrated north from the southern states. What led them to the migration were the deprivations and oppressive conditions in the South.

Patrick D. Bowen states that in 1910 the African American population in New York was 60,000. By 1920, however, due to the World War I need for cheap labor and the northern migration of blacks to meet the labor demand, the African American population had increased to 150,000.⁵²

After Noble Drew Ali's death in 1929, the Temple survived under the leadership of W. D. Fard. He alleged that the original religion of black people was Islam and their true nationality was the "lost-found tribe of Shabazz." Thus, the myth of Shabazz came with W.D. Fard. He claimed that the way to salvation was to seek the true self. He left the movement in 1934 and nothing exactly is known what happened to him. Elijah Poole succeeded him in the leadership of the Temple, and he then became the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. He ruled the Nation from 1934 till his death in 1974. The teachings of the Nation were the same that Fard had originally taught: they were the members of Shabazz tribe, the original man was black, and their original religion was Islam.⁵³

Elijah taught the members of the Nation of Islam that Fard was born to a tribe of Quraysh in 1877 in Mecca.⁵⁴ Fard came to Detroit in 1931 where he taught, "Negroes were members of the lost tribe of Shabazz from Mecca. He had come to resurrect this Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America." However, in 1934 Fard disappeared and Elijah's leadership lasted almost forty years until his death.⁵⁵

Elijah's writings consisted of more passages from the Bible than the Qur'an. Elijah was interpreting some biblical passages and Qur'anic verses just to serve his purpose. W. D. Muhammad argued that Fard was creating un-Islamic myths "to develop independent minds."⁵⁶

Members of the Nation of Islam endorsed “black separatism” along with Black Nationalism, and also advocated “territorial separatism.” The Nation of Islam, which was also associated with black separatism, asked for a separate state in the United States for African Americans for the reason that they believed blacks could not benefit from equality, freedom and justice under the governance of whites.⁵⁷

As he was influenced by Fard, Elijah Muhammad claimed a divine status for Fard as God incarnate, and he claimed himself to be the Messenger of God (Fard). Both of these claims were irreconcilable with Islamic teachings. As their teachings were against *shahada*, which states that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger, Fard’s and Elijah’s claims were *shirk*, which refers to the idolatry of associating something with God that is not God. *Shirk* is the greatest sin in Islam. However, W. D. Muhammad states the fact that his father already knew his teachings were not in accordance with Sunni Islam but many blacks at his time gained “pride and self-respect, thrift and discipline, and economic stability.” Elijah’s messages were powerful for those who were so long degraded under white supremacy.⁵⁸ Also, as Clifton E. Marsh argues, “The Nation of Islam was not primarily a religious body, but a social movement organization designed to alleviate socioeconomic problems of the African American.”⁵⁹

Besides, as Sherman Jackson states and many examples in the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* reveal—this paper was published by Black Muslims who were Nation of Islam members before the influx of immigrant Muslims—the perception of being a black in America before meeting Elijah Muhammad and be a member of the Nation of Islam was someone “who spent his entire life religiously aimless, womanizing, drinking, selling drugs, and committing violent crimes” and this perception “suddenly (or

gradually) replaced these activities with acts of religiosity and moral rectitude.”⁶⁰ Interestingly, Sherman Jackson indicates that Islam at the time it was associated with Elijah Muhammad reinforced positive attributes such as being educated and hardworking. His message lifted up the African American community in contrast to the opposite attributes for Sunni Muslims (commonly associated with immigrant Muslims).⁶¹

Sherman A. Jackson further mentions that black Muslims (Sunni) were distinct from Black Muslims (members of the Nation of Islam). Sunni Islam in its core teachings is committed to racial justice and not with racism or racist Islamist propaganda.⁶² On the other hand, Jackson is of the opinion that “Islam owes its momentum among Blackamericans to the phenomenon of Black Religion.”⁶³

F. American Society of Muslims

Elijah Muhammad’s son, Imam Warithuddin Muhammad (at the time Wallace D. Muhammad), questioned his father’s creed. He, along with Malcolm X, was suspended from the Nation of Islam a few times. The first suspension happened in 1963. After Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, he returned to the Nation of Islam aware that it was not a religious movement but an organizational structure.⁶⁴

W. D. Mohammad was born in 1933. After the death of his father in 1975, he was appointed to the leadership of the Nation of Islam. He radically changed the Nation in everything from its name to its rituals and adjusted them to orthodox Islam. Curtis states during this time period, he is the one who “led more African Americans towards Sunni Islam than any other person in history.” Therefore, he came to be called *mujaddid*, a renewer of religion. Despite not following a black separatist agenda as his father Elijah Muhammad had, he kept working for improving life standards of African Americans,

teaching that blacks should “take pride in their ethnic heritage, and [were] to interpret Sunni Islam in light of African American historical circumstances.” He also kept advocating for black uplift and reprimanded immoral behaviors.⁶⁵ He promoted “education, jobs for husbands and fathers and moral excellence.”⁶⁶

W. D. Muhammad also abandoned the December celebration of Ramadan and adjusted it to the Islamic lunar calendar. He allowed whites to be in the movement, and rejected the desire for a separate nation and state for black people in the United States. He emphasized the universality and inclusiveness of Islam, even placing American flags in mosques. The movement first came to be called the World Community of Al-Islam, and then they changed it to the American Muslim Mission. The movement eventually got the name of American Society of Muslims.⁶⁷

As the myths of the movement changed, the American Society of Muslims began to refer to Bilal ibn Rabah. In 1975, Wallace D. Muhammad said he would rather be called as “Bilalian,” which was a new religio-ethnic label that he thought would be more appropriate for African American Muslims. Changing the name of the official newspaper from *Muhammad Speaks* to *Bilalian News* demonstrates the importance of this new label.⁶⁸ Bilal ibn Rabah from Abyssinia was a former black slave who became a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims all over the world know him as the first *mu’adhdhin* (prayer-caller) of Islam.⁶⁹ Curtis states, in addition to referencing Islam’s religious aspects, its universality and inclusiveness, the integration of *Bilalian* ideas provided a way to defend blackness.⁷⁰

G. What changed in the transition from being Shabazz to Bilalian?

In terms of African American coming to a religious awakening through Islam, the first half of the twentieth century can be related to Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad, the second half to Malcolm X and W.D. Muhammad. Even though Malcolm X did not live long after he separated from the Nation of Islam, his strong influence on African Americans continued to influence later generations. Basically African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century were looking for a black revolution that would create for blacks a separate land, state and nation.⁷¹ However, this idea changed in the transition led by W.D. Muhammad.

Malcolm X joined the Nation of Islam in the summer of 1954. Interestingly, Malcolm X, who was charismatic and a catalyst for the movement, was the most influential person in recruiting people to be members of Islam and in the transition of Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam. Even though he had been part of Nation of Islam for a decade, his conversion to Sunni Islam in 1964 and his rather short experience as a Sunni African American Muslim is often associated with his influence on African Americans to converting Sunni Islam. However, the transition of Nation of Islam, which Bowen calls “amorphous Islam”, to orthodoxy had theoretically begun under the direction of W. D. Muhammad.⁷²

H. Appropriation of Islam (“Islamizing”) according to the needs of racially stigmatized African Americans.

In his article “Race, Ethnicity, and Religion,” George Yancey writes that racial groups can apply or refer to religion as a way to find answers to questions of meaning. He states “[q]uestions of meaning deal with issues such as purpose, direction, making sense

of tragedy, the meaning of good and evil, and so on.”⁷³ George Yancey defines racial groups as “important subcultures for the development of answers to questions of meaning.” He refers to racial groups as “subcultures” in that they share “similar social and political interests with the other members of one’s group.” He further states these social and cultural concerns “can be buttressed or opposed by a given religious belief system.”⁷⁴ This point can be applied to the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, both of which controlled Islam as a religion to serve the interests and meet the needs of African Americans who were seeking to gain recognition and respectability.

I. Religion as a Way of Gaining Recognition for African American Muslims

When Islam is presented as a way of gaining recognition and respect for a socially degraded, economically exploited, and politically oppressed group, an *ayat* in the Qur’an best explains how it is accomplished:

O humankind! Surely We have created you from a single (pair of) male and female, and made you into tribes and families so that you may know one another (and so build mutuality and cooperative relationships, not so that you may take pride in your differences of race or social rank, and breed enmities). Surely, the noblest, most honorable of you in God’s sight is the one best in piety, righteousness, and reverence for God. Surely God is All-Knowing, All-Aware.⁷⁵

As related to this verse in the Qur’an, Wadud interprets that Islam identifies human beings both with a larger group (nations, tribes, families) and to smaller groups. The purpose here is to interconnect people so that “you may know one another” to form an identity. However, the Qur’an warns the people in case they regard themselves superior according to their race, families, or tribes and emphasizes that your noblest and most honorable would be the one who is “best in piety, righteousness, and reverence for God.”⁷⁶

Not only in the Qur'an, but also in the Prophet Muhammad's time there are examples that people were warned and reproached because of their supposed racial superiority. Unal quotes two *hadiths* (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad: "No Arab is superior to a non-Arab, and no white person is superior to a black person (Ibn Hanbal, 5:41); and "If a black Abyssinian Muslim is to rule over Muslims, he should be obeyed (Muslim, "Imarah," 37).⁷⁷

Albert J. Raboteau states that since African Americans lived in a country in which they had been enslaved, a country dominated by Christians, the way of redeeming the history of enslavement, oppression, degradation and disfranchisement on their behalf was to reject anything that were given by the white society. That is why they rejected Christianity as a religion and claimed a new religious-racial identity for African Americans. In order to establish his teachings, Timothy Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple in New Jersey in 1913. He taught his followers that they were not Negroes but Asiatics. Their original home was Morocco and their true nationality was Moorish American. They rejected their American names and received new names and identity cards issued by Noble Drew Ali. Inasmuch as Noble Drew Ali taught them their true self, they could overcome white racism and the oppression they were exposed to in America.⁷⁸

The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam addressed the problems of race and identity in America. Wadud states that even though they adopted some symbols from traditional Islam, they deviated from the mainstream in issues such as *tawhid* (the absolute oneness of God) and *khatam-ul anbiya* (the infallibility of God's Messenger Muhammad being the last prophet.)⁷⁹

These two quasi-religious movements, the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, were not the only Islamic movements in 1900s; however, they came to be associated with African Americans. Even though these groups called themselves “Islamic,” they were not Sunni groups. Kathleen O’Connor gives us a very detailed and lucid understanding of how some African American quasi-Islamic movements syncretized the Christian notions with some Islamic elements, and she refers to it as “the Islamicization of Black American Christianity.”⁸⁰

Elijah was trying to form a Muslim community in which no one feared anyone but God, who knew that God was on their side: such people were sacred in God’s sight.⁸¹ Elijah Muhammad asserted that “by nature *all* members of the black nation are Muslims (lovers of peace), and thus they number well over the one billion mark.”⁸²

Elijah Muhammad continuously emphasized the significance of brotherhood, justice and equality in Islam to his adherents:

Islam recognizes complete equality of Brotherhood; a Muslim is truly the brother of another Believer, regardless of how black the skin or how kinked the hair. He is welcomed with sincere and open arms and recognized by his light skinned or copper-colored Arab brother.⁸³

Elijah taught that Islam dignifies and removes fear from the black people.⁸⁴ He also stated that in order to know themselves, Wallace D. Fard or Wallace Fard Muhammad came from the Holy City of Mecca, Arabia in 1930 and taught them the knowledge of themselves: the knowledge that they were Asiatics and descendants of the tribe of Shabazz. The tribe of Shabazz, as Elijah noted, were “the tribe that came with the earth... sixty trillion years ago when a great explosion on our planet divided it in two parts. One we call earth, the other moon.” They believed that Allah (which is Fard as he

was believed to be God in person) was the one who first discovered where they lived, that “rich Nile Valley of Egypt and the present seat of the Holy City, Mecca, Arabia.”⁸⁵ He believed the religion of the whole tribe was Islam.⁸⁶

Elijah farther taught they were lost and Allah (Fard in their sight) found them in the wilderness of North America. Thus, they called themselves as “the Lost-Found Nation.”⁸⁷ Elijah also taught that, “Islam is our salvation. It removes fear, grief and sorrow from any believer and it brings to us peace of mind and contentment.”⁸⁸

The NOI as a fraternal lodge for African Americans, rather than having a religious agenda, aimed at generating African American activism, and they appropriated Islam according to their needs.

Turner states that because African Americans’ arrived at the Americas against their will and stripped of their African heritage, they must reject their slave names and identify themselves with new names so that they can form a cultural identity. And Turner further states: “Since the colonial era, Islam has provided black Americans with alternative names and identities.”⁸⁹ Islam has given to its adherents “the chance to signify themselves, giving them new names and new political and cultural identities.”⁹⁰ Turner explains that when a black person in America, whether it is a Muslim or not, adopts a Muslim name, this is regarded to be a change in his or her political, cultural or religious identity; and Turner names this situation as “intellectual resistance to racism.”⁹¹

Based upon Turner’s point, Noble Drew Ali was constructing new identities while changing the slave names of the members of the Moorish Science Temple because their slave names were a sign of their unwanted history. Drew Ali appropriated Islamic symbols and rituals to better his purpose of ethnic awareness.⁹² Turner notes that Drew

Ali's point had nothing to do with orthodox Islam; his was to remove the disgrace of slavery, to challenge racism and the ethnocentrism of American Christianity.⁹³

From a different perspective, yet in the way to create identities, Malcolm X wrote:

The Koran compels the Muslim world to take a stand on the side of those whose human rights are being violated no matter what the religious persuasion of the victim is. Islam is a religion, which concerns itself with the human rights of all mankind, despite race, color, or creed. It recognizes all (everyone) as part of one human family.⁹⁴

Even though this approach to Islam that Malcolm put forward is different from his attack on white racism that had long been the core of his preaching, the idea of *ummah* (the international Muslim community) is what Malcolm regards as a necessary solution. However, he further stated that he did not change, but his scope broadened after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam did not make him forget the sufferings of his people.⁹⁵

Malcolm X further said, "True Islam removes racism, because people of all colors and races who accept its religious principles and bow down to one God, Allah, also automatically accept each other as brothers and sisters, regardless of their differences in complexion." Malcolm states that Islam can cure "cancer of racism" from American white society.⁹⁶

As emphasized above, African Americans found in Islam a way to create new identities. Many African American in the 20th century converted to Islam and did so for reasons related to identity, spiritual meaning and resistance to racism. In the chapters that follow we shall examine and analyze the conversion experiences of some twentieth century African American Muslims, and to that task we now turn.

Chapter 2

Identity Reconstruction in African American Sunni Converts: Narratives of African American Conversion to Islam

A. Introduction

Despite being misinterpreted and arousing “phobia” in some people, Islam has been the fastest growing religion in the United States and it is expected to replace Judaism to become America’s second largest religion.⁹⁷ This undeniable increase in the visibility of Islam in the United States stands out as a significant phenomenon. This is owing to the importance of (*at-*) *Tabligh*, which invites people to the message of God and to the Prophet Muhammad in Islam. Ali Unal defines *tabligh* as “conveying a message to others as best as possible; conveying Islam or God’s message to people to the extent that, left to their (carnal) soul and conscience they can make a free choice between belief and unbelief.”⁹⁸

Although an exact number of American Muslims cannot be given, based on data from the survey carried out Pew Research Center in combination with U.S. Census data, it is estimated that there are about 1.8 million Muslim adults and 2.75 Muslims of all ages (including children under 18) living in the U.S. in 2011. This numbers also stand for an increase of about 300,000 adults and 100,000 Muslims children since 2007.⁹⁹

With regard to the ethnic diversity of Muslims in the United States, Sam Afridi makes a comparison of Mecca and the United States. Afridi explains that Muslims in the United States reflects the diversity of the Muslim world. It is estimated that in the United States there are Muslims from 50 different nations across the world. The majority is of

African descent (African American Muslims) and they represent about one third of the whole Muslim population in the United States.¹⁰⁰ The Pew Research Center's survey in 2011 also shows 54% of African American Muslims affiliate themselves with Sunni Islam,¹⁰¹ which was represented under the leadership of W. D. Muhammad who rejected racial segregation and black nationalism.¹⁰²

Aside being a part of their African heritage, Islam has been an attractive religion for African Americans due to various reasons. The number of conversions to Islam compared to white Americans is higher among black Americans. For example, according to the Pew Research Center's survey in 2011, 63% of African American Muslims are converts to Islam.¹⁰³ Also, 65% of American Muslims are African American, and a majority of them have converted to Islam.¹⁰⁴ Although they state some particular and individual motivations as reasons for their conversion, African American converts often emphasize that the equality, discipline, and spirituality they find in Islam was important to their conversion.

Additionally, in a case study conducted in Ohio state prisons, S. I. Mufti suggests that Islam appeals to African Americans owing to its egalitarianism:

“From my personal experience as a chaplain in the U.S. Federal Penal System, Islam is most impressive for prison inmates because of its simplicity, comprehensiveness, universal egalitarianism and the brotherhood of its community. It has special appeal to those who are oppressed and are not tied to any privileged class. Thus African Americans are historically attracted to it. (pp. 2-3)¹⁰⁵

Related to Mufti's point, Victoria Lee also indicates that one of the reasons for the large number of African Americans conversions to Islam is that there are highly structured codes in Islam, which leads African Americans to live a moral and productive life.¹⁰⁶

According to a survey in 2011, among U.S. born Muslims, 46% of African Americans are committed to the faith compared to 27% of native-born Muslims who are not African Americans.¹⁰⁷ What is more, weekly mosque attendance is more common among African American Muslims (63%) than foreign-born Muslims.¹⁰⁸ According to the same Pew Research Center survey, most Muslim Americans pray daily; and among native born American Muslims, 73 % of African Americans pray all five *salah* daily, which is above the average of American Muslims from other ethnicities.¹⁰⁹

Americans who have been embracing Islam come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds; nevertheless, today Islam in America is often and understandably associated with African Americans. Lee states that Muslims have gained a growing visibility in the U.S. and this has resulted from both the immigration of foreign Muslims and the conversion of native-born American Muslims. Lee's survey demonstrates that among native-born American Muslims converts, the largest number are African Americans.¹¹⁰

In his 2009 University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, Brian Coleman argued that the reason for the growth of Islam among African Americans could be linked to the role of Islam in promoting racial equality in early twentieth century movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. Even though the Islam being accepted was not orthodox Islam, these movements have a significant place in paving the way for making later conversion to orthodox Islam possible.¹¹¹

Shadee Elmasry addresses another point relevant to the popularity of Islam. She expresses her views on why *tawhid* (Arabic word meaning "the oneness of God") in Islam sounds appealing to African Americans seeking to form an identity. She notably

clarifies that first and foremost *tawhid* makes Muslims give credence to God's being the ultimate source of power; thus, Islam eliminates distractions and focuses the attention of believers on God's oneness. Islam also makes the believer aware that God holds exclusive authority over human life and that this world is a place of trial. Accordingly, the belief of *tawhid* relieves African Americans of their past or present experiences as a minority group in the United States. From the perspective of an African American Muslim, the study and application of Islamic doctrines "diminishes the worth and importance of any worldly superiors who may be oppressive or antagonistic." For this reason, "the study of *tawhid*, in sum, has a spiritually therapeutic function for a crushed psyche."¹¹²

Lee has also found out significant points related to possible outcomes of the conversion of African Americans to Islam. For example, she indicates conversion to Islam "offers the opportunity for rebirth for both women and men as black American remains mired in poverty and continues to face racial oppression"; and conversion also gives an opportunity to "shed and renovate their devalued identities."¹¹³ Conversion further provides solutions to problems regarding family and domestic life. It eliminates the stereotyped images of black men and women using drugs and alcohol. Islam also discourages being a consumer by promoting a modest life style in many aspects. Additionally, aside from their historical heritage in America, African Americans who adopt Islam as a religion become "part of an organized and glorious civilization that commands respect from the West." They gain a sense of control over the self. They gain authorization; they are not powerless and invisible. Islam gives African Americans a sense of self along with group solidarity.¹¹⁴ Identity construction has been a significant

issue for African Americans. Ever since their first presence in the Americas, they have been both physically and psychologically stigmatized and degraded. That led them to construct a counter-identity against the identity that was imposed upon them by white supremacists. Thus, converting or reverting to Islam and constructing an identity through Islam have been influential ways of standing against racism and white supremacy.

In his 2010 New York University dissertation, Amir Al-Islam explains that some African Americans regard conversion “as an escape, psychologically, from the otherness of blackness. Thus, they undergo an identity transition from African American Muslim to ‘just Muslim.’” However, some of them prefer keeping their black identity. Those who do may then criticize those who tend to underestimate their blackness, regarding them as “victims of an identity crisis which results in internal self-hatred and self-denial.”¹¹⁵

Al-Islam further states that from their captivity in Africa to the Islamic movements in twentieth century race and ethnicity have been an integral part of African American Muslim experience both internally and externally. Within that four hundred year time frame, identity and the construction of identity hold a significant place in the lives of African American Muslims.¹¹⁶ Al-Islam defines “identity” as “the way in which African American Sunni Muslims construct their individual self-concept and collective identities.”¹¹⁷

In addition to Al-Islam’s point on identity, Abbas Barzegar suggests that in African American Islam, as a strategy of resistance and liberation, identity is addressed as formulaic and functionalist. Barzegar quotes from Haddad who is of the view that “identity is related in some way to the ideas of function, purpose, or mission.” Then Barzegar reads Haddad’s description of identity as a “strategy” or “course of action.” He

thinks this description of identity can be replaced with “ideology” or “orientation,” which, Barzegar thinks, is concerning because he asks how “an American Muslim or Muslim American institution *identify* with a particular strategy or ideology of being Muslim and expressing Islam in the United States in the current moment.”¹¹⁸

Abdin Chande’s describes Islam as “an inherited identity” for immigrant Muslims and “an expression of empowerment for African American Muslims.” These are noteworthy descriptions. African Americans got to know about Islam through the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple. For them, Islam was represented to be, as these movements told it, an important need for their community life.¹¹⁹ However, some African Americans began to look for more than the wealth or success that Black Islam was promising them—some were looking for an authentic Islam.¹²⁰ As a marginalized group, African Americans found in their experience of Islam a religion that “articulates issues of social justice, equality and empowerment or identity formation.”¹²¹

Taking into consideration the experience of African Americans with Islam, I shall present narratives of African American Sunni Muslims. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate through the actual voices of African American Muslims the contribution of Islam to their racial, cultural and social identity.

B. Methodology

In this chapter we shall seek to gain an understanding of racial identity as it is related to the social awakening that African Americans experience through their conversion journey to Islam. I shall examine some already-conducted interviews, news stories and other narratives related to African Americans’ conversion to Islam with attention to the influence of Islam on identity. African American Muslims are a big

percentage among other Muslims (65 %) in the United States; and they generally associate themselves with Sunni Islam.

This study is a qualitative study. A descriptive and analytical approach will explore how answers to specific research questions illuminate the African American experience of conversion to Islam. Even though some of the narratives and stories of conversion are already conducted interviews, not every part of the interviews is included, and only the parts that help to gain a better understanding of the meaning of conversion are taken into consideration.

The data is collected from the literature on African American Muslims, news stories, dissertations and theses. Some valuable narratives were found that contribute to the process of relevant data collection. Some of the participants were already key figures in African American and Muslim communities. The participants and their stories were selected in order to provide data in response to the research questions.

The in-depth analysis of conversion stories and narratives forms the basis of this chapter. The stories of interviewees do not necessarily answer all research questions. However, their statements about conversion to Islam provide answers to one or more questions, and only those whose statements contribute data relevant to the research questions are included. The conversion stories and narratives of the study participants are contextualized in accordance with the research questions. As the questions are not asked individually to each participant but are gathered from already published sources, it is difficult to contextualize the stories and narratives in relation to the proposed research questions. However, the stories and narratives give vital information about African American Sunni Muslims and their conversion objectives. Even if each participant has

his or her own unique story of conversion, the reader can still acquire a basic and generalized understanding of what was important to converts in his or her different experiences of conversion. Although I was not able to conduct first-hand in-depth interviews as originally planned, the research questions devised for interviews have been applied to the various narratives that will be presented in this chapter. The objective of acquiring knowledge about conversion to Islam through the stories and narratives of African American Sunni Muslims has been pursued by asking specific research questions of the already published stories and narratives. This study aims to examine the contribution of Islam to the ethnic and racial identity of African American Sunni Muslims, and to that end the following research questions address the narratives that follow:

1- What were their motives to convert to Islam?

This question is important as it unearths the core point of African Americans who converted to Islam. The motives that have led African Americans to convert to Sunni Islam have an important place in understanding the African American Muslim experience.

2- What does Islam mean to them?

Muslim converts, for sure, have distinct reasons for converting to Islam. However, as I thought that there might be a common reason or shared experiences and objectives behind the big percentage of African American converts, this question might be explanatory and inductive.

- 3- How do African American Muslims think of Islam both as a way of spiritual life and as a religion through which they gain recognition and respect via converting to Islam?

Related to the second question, the third question digs up subjects' present experiences with Islam. If Islam has given African American Muslims respectability and recognition in this world, how do they reconcile that with the spirituality of Islam, which is more otherworldly?

- 4- What is the impact of the experience of being part of *ummah* (the worldwide Muslim community)?

Sometimes being a part of *ummah* can be a totally different experience from what they experienced before conversion. I wanted to see that how an African American Sunni Muslim would perceive being a part of worldwide community of Muslims.

- 5- Does Islam make it possible to claim a proud heritage as both African American and a Muslim?

Some authors who work on African Americans pay the utmost attention the relation between important personalities in the history of Islam and African Americans, and attention is also given to the enslaved Africans in the Americas. The reason behind African American conversions to Islam is linked to these existences. For example, Bilal ibn Rabah and Zayd ibn Harisa, who were among the closest friends of the Prophet Muhammad, are important people who are highly regarded by African American Muslims. I wanted to know if such personalities contributed to the conversion experience.

6- How have religion and identity work together in the personal experience of converts, both as Muslims and as Americans?

African Americans' position within American Muslim community is a critical one. As African Americans' (65 %) outnumber white and immigrant American Muslims, their positions within the *ummah* in the United States as both Americans and Muslims are noteworthy. Undeniably religious conversions generate new identities. I want to see how the issue of identity works in African American Sunni Muslims.

C. Narratives

In this part of the study, I shall present conversion narratives and stories of some African American Sunni Muslims in the context of the research questions above. My focus is directed by the research questions, so attention will be given to those parts of stories that discuss motives for embracing Islam, racial and ethnic identity, the sense of brotherhood and being part of Islamic *ummah*, the relationship between Islam and identity, and Islam and race.

a. Malcolm X

Malcolm X's narrative of conversion to Islam is preeminently because his life and personality have been very influential for many African Americans who converted to Islam. Even though he turned out to be a very influential and charismatic person for African American Muslims, he had a very short time as a Sunni Muslim. His affiliation with Sunni Islam is linked to his pilgrimage to Mecca. It happens about two decades after

his separation from the Nation of Islam. It is a re-awakening and re-discovery for Malcolm in terms of recognizing what Islam really is.

Malcolm X spent much of his young adulthood in vice and crimes. He was “bootlegging, pimping, and selling drugs.” He was first introduced to the Nation of Islam when he was serving a seven-year sentence in Norfolk Prison, a maximum-security facility in Massachusetts. He became a strong follower of Elijah Muhammad when he was twenty-two and he remained with the Nation of Islam for twelve years until he heard about Elijah’s illicit relationships with his secretaries.¹²² Then, he left the Nation of Islam. Three months after his deportation he set out for Mecca to participate in the annual pilgrimage of Muslims. Even though he was so much into the Nation of Islam and served as an active member to the Elijah Muhammad and his movement, his pilgrimage was eye opening and it changed his understanding of Islam. Clifton Marsh states that after his pilgrimage to Mecca in April, 1964: “Malcolm was embarrassed because, as a Muslim minister, he did not know the prayer ritual, nor did he practice the ‘Pillars of Islam’ and other Islamic principles. He was also impressed with the spirit of brotherhood, lack of color-consciousness and non-racist attitudes among Muslims.” After his *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, he began to feel more suspicious of the Nation of Islam and this reinforced his conversion to Sunni Islam.¹²³ He then embraced Sunni Islam and changed his name into El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He criticized the doctrines of the Nation and argued that true Islam does not separate races; it eliminates racism.

Malcolm X states, “In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete

human being.” The conversion of Malcolm X to Sunni Islam encouraged conversion many other Muslims in the Nation to convert to orthodoxy.¹²⁴

Malcolm X stated in the last interview he had given a day before his assassination: “Elijah taught us that Mecca was a symbol of heaven itself. He said that since whites were devils by nature they could not accept Islam, and therefore no whites could be Muslims.”¹²⁵ On the other hand, Malcolm X’s answer when he was asked why he still holds “the black color as main base” even though in Islam there isn’t any emphasis on race or color is worthy of note: “As a Black American I do feel that my first responsibility is to my twenty-two million fellow Black Americans who suffer from the same indignities because of their color as I do. I don’t believe my own personal problem is ever solved until the problem is solved for all twenty-two million [African Americans] of us.”¹²⁶ After his deportation from the Nation, Malcolm X founded the Muslim Mosque to teach Islam to African Americans and the organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) to fight for “complete respect recognition as human beings for all Black Americans.”¹²⁷

According to Edward Curtis, Malcolm was devout as a black Muslim; however, Islam for him was a spiritual and religious way of life. He wasn’t of the opinion that “Islam could offer a specific solution to every political problem.”¹²⁸

Michael A. Gomez is of the opinion that even though black nationalism and orthodox Islam are questionably incompatible, Malcolm X is the one who demonstrated that they both can work together. Both his spiritual and political personality made it possible.¹²⁹ He proudly called himself as a Sunni Muslim and a “black revolutionary.”¹³⁰

Ryan LaMothe writes about that “a person’s political experiences and religious experiences interact such that political experiences and ideas shape the person’s religious values and beliefs, and vice versa.”¹³¹ His contention is that Malcolm X’s conversion to Islam should be considered together with his political stance.¹³² Malcolm encountered Muslim scholar, Dr. Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi, who told him, “No man has believed perfectly until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” Malcolm’s religious subjectivity was deeply influenced by his pilgrimage to Mecca, for it made him realize that Muslims travelers “were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair- all together brothers.”¹³³ These made him acknowledge that “Allah loved and valued people of all color equally.” This religious awakening led Malcolm X to change his political stance towards whites as well.¹³⁴

Notably, Sherman Jackson states that if Malcolm X were alive today, “he would be able in good conscience as a practicing Muslim to abandon his earlier rejectionism and proclaim without hesitation, “Yes, I am an American.” This would neither threaten nor compromise his status as a champion of protest in the Blackamerican community.”¹³⁵ The point Jackson makes relates the cultural and religious heritage of African Americans with Islam. Islam, rather than being reduced to “the status of an alien, hostile intrusion”, “enjoys whatever status it does as a bona fide American religion.”¹³⁶

In addition to Jackson’s point, Amir Al-Islam states that although the majority of African American Sunni Muslims “assert that any identification with blackness in antithetical to universal Islam,” Malcolm X “saw no contradictions between their Islam and their racialized and ethnicized identities.”¹³⁷

b. Imam W. D. Muhammad

Warith D. Muhammad, who was a well-known personality as an African American Sunni Muslim, passed a similar path like Malcolm X did. He was born in 1933. He was the seventh of Elijah and Clara Muhammad's eight children. He immersed himself in the study of Arabic, the Qur'an and Islam.¹³⁸ Thanks to his academic interest, he got to know about orthodox Islam. Therefore, he also had a crucial role indeed in the way to introduce Sunni Islam to most of the members of the Nation of Islam.¹³⁹ In his interview for *The Islamic Monthly* with Michael Vicente Perez and Fatima Bahloul¹⁴⁰, W. D. Muhammad stated that African American Muslims determine their outlook on everything according to Islam, and this encourages them to be "independent thinkers" so that they can contribute to Islam in America. Islam is not only a religion that has a spiritual position towards life; it requires its adherents to have responsibilities in the outside world too. W. D. Muhammad further stated that a true Islam should enclose every aspect of a Muslim's life. Even though Imam Muhammad's message is still more appealing to African Americans than Elijah Muhammad's, it addresses both white and black Americans. He does not emphasize nationalist points; instead, for him, Islam was a spiritual force rather than a political tool; and he desired to be known a spiritual figure rather than a political one.¹⁴¹

Imam Muhammad is an important figure not only for black Muslims but for all Americans as well. He was the person who was "responsible for certifying all Muslim Americans who wish to undertake the *hajj* to Mecca." Besides, he was asked to open the U.S. Senate with prayer in 1990, and he attended President Bill Clinton's inaugural celebration.¹⁴²

Furthermore, during an interview with Clifton E. Marsh, W.D. Muhammad was asked how he would see the World Community of Al-Islam in the West in the year 2000. He answered: "I hope the year 2000 the World Community of Al-Islam in the West will be called American Muslims. I hope Muslims will be so comfortable in America that we won't have to introduce any structure or anything, just be American Muslims."¹⁴³

c. Keith Ellison

Keith Ellison, the first African American Muslim representative in the Congress, was born into a Catholic family and was a Catholic before his conversion to Islam. Even though he does not give a very detailed answer why he embraced Islam, he states that he was "drawn to the multi-national congregation." He further states he didn't feel comfortable in Catholicism, explaining that it was not because of the religion itself but because of how he experienced it. When he was a student in Wayne State University, he said he was "looking for other things." He emphasizes his conversion in Islam as re-discovery. He carries on: "I investigated it, it worked for me, and it made me have a sense of inspiration and wonder, and I became a Muslim. It's been working for me ever since." He also stated: "My faith and my identity as a Muslim—I never saw it as something that made my job harder." On the other hand, he accepts the fact that there is a profile of Muslims in the United States, which is not always welcoming; and he admits this affects him as well.¹⁴⁴

As a last point, he states that African American Muslims should see themselves as both part of the *ummah* and also as Americans. There should be a bridge between America and the Muslim world.

d. Andre Carson

Andre Carson is the second African American Muslim representative in the Congress. He was raised a Baptist but went to a Catholic school. He was planning to be a priest. After serious talks with the priests at the school, the priests encouraged him to study other religions, too. He then began to study Rumi, a Sufi Islamic scholar of the thirteenth century. As he was interested in hip-hop and at that time some rapper artists were already into Islam, he began to read the Qur'an and embraced Islam. Importantly, he stated "you had Muslims policing the neighborhoods, pushing out drug dealers, and I was greatly influenced by that [...] to be particularly unique... because I saw the kind of firepower that Islam brought intellectually as well as spiritually."¹⁴⁵ Carson is concerned about the fight against racism, terrorism and national security threats. He emphasizes the necessity of uniting "as Americans across racial divides, across religious divides, across social divides, and address the issues that affect all of us."¹⁴⁶ When asked about what American identity means to him, he emphasizes: "Oh, wow, it means so much because I am a very proud American. Most important, I'm a proud Hoosier, and more important than that, I'm a proud a Muslim. And so you can be a proud American and a proud Muslim at the same time. Most Muslims want the best for America. Most Muslims are proud Americans."¹⁴⁷

e. Dr. Jamillah Karim

As in the example of Malcolm X and his conversion to Sunni Islam, Dr. Jamillah Karim¹⁴⁸ has said in interviews that the main motive behind the conversion of African Americans is the overcoming of racism. She states that African Americans read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and she had been influenced by "his description of Islamic

brotherhood and his testimony that Islam would remove the race problem in America.” Also she states that some others witnessed the Nation of Islam as a cause to gain cultural and economic dignity: Islam leads them to build stronger families and communities. Islam from this perspective gives them a sense ownership of the American society. Islam empowers individual beings to connect to a social identity because the ethics of Islam requires its adherents both to shape an individual identity and a sense of purpose being in society. Thus, it brings the results of overcoming racism, injustices and being included to the society. However, she states that we cannot assure that racism does not exist among Muslims. From the examples she gives, she states there are African American Muslim women who have been to immigrant mosques where they often experience discrimination, they would prefer going to an African American mosque.

f. Dr. Evans¹⁴⁹

Victoria Lee’s interview with Dr. Evans, who is an African American convert to Islam, reveals noteworthy details about how he refers to Islam to find solutions to any kind of problem. Dr. Evans is an Amir of the Masjid in Northeastern City area, which is mainly populated by African American Muslims. He grew up in a black Baptist family in Georgia. Even though he had been present at some meetings of the Nation of Islam and Black Panther Party, he didn’t adhere to either of them. Then, he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which introduced him to Islam. He began reading more about Islam. Lee states “Islam, for Evans, seemed to offer a more practical solution to the problems of racism and injustice.”¹⁵⁰ After he got his Masters in Religion and Doctorate in Ministry, he decided to adopt and practice Islam as a religion. He joined the Worldwide

Community of Muslims in the West, which was then under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Muhammad.¹⁵¹

In point of fact, Dr. Evans has a poignant life story. His son was shot dead by a policeman in the city. Although the African American community read this incident as a racist assault, "white on black" crime, Dr. Evans refused to speak to the press in order not to provoke the situation any longer.¹⁵² Lee states that Dr. Evans took this period as "a transformative period as he began to seriously immerse himself in the study and application of the Koran." Dr. Evans quotes from a *hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad), which says, "patience is the first response to calamity." Therefore, he avoided making relations tense and sought ways to make things better for his own community. He also reminded himself of the period when Muslims with the Prophet Muhammad had to move from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, which is called *hijrah* (emigration) "when Muslims from different cultures and regions had to merge their diverse worldviews." Inspired by the *hijrah* to Medina, Dr. Evans worked hard to ease tensions between the black and white populations in Northeastern City. He opened transitional house for former prisoners and established a Center for Middle East Understanding.¹⁵³ As pointing the fact that Muslims are financially in a better position than average Americans, Dr. Evans emphasized, "Muslims stand up for justice and be at the forefront of positive change in their communities." He further pointed the fact "they did this to us so we can do it to them" has no place in the teachings of Allah; instead, Muslims should focus their effort on works of social justice and positive changes.¹⁵⁴ In order to plant the same understanding, Dr. Evans and the leadership of the *Masjid* try to place the notion of "mutuality" in African American *ummah*: "I can never be what I

ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”¹⁵⁵

g. Imam Talib Abdur Rashid

Another narrative is that of Imam Talib Abdur Rashid. He was born in North Carolina. He came to New York when he was eight years old. Before his conversion, he was a Lutheran Christian. He had wanted to be an astronaut; however, he gave up his dream due to white racism and discrimination. The year a teacher deterred him from thinking about becoming an astronaut, “he became more theologically inquisitive which caused him to drift away from the church.” This search led him to study other religions too.¹⁵⁶ In the meantime, he was performing in the Negro Theater Company. He once played a Muslim man in “The Trial” which was about Marvin X’s transition from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam. Brothers from the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in Harlem, New York, which is the first African American Sunni Muslim Mosque founded by Imam Taufiq in 1960s,¹⁵⁷ were very influenced by his performance. Imam Talib was then invited to a special program organized by the Mosque. Imam Taufiq was at the program too. Imam Talib was attracted to “his depth of knowledge and understanding of religion.” Later, Imam Talib was invited to a Friday prayer at the Mosque. In 1971, after the Friday prayer he embraced Islam in the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood and became an influential figure in MIB.¹⁵⁸

Al-Islam states that Imam Talib Abdur Rashid embraced Islam because “his ideas of self determination and focus on black liberation, upliftment, and empowerment were foundational to the credo of MIB [Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood]. Sheikh Taufiq’s Islamic interpretations and expressions of Islam were centered in the black experience

and thus eschewed any semblance of an Arabized Islam.”¹⁵⁹ Sheikh Tawfiq also emphasized the idea that there is neither racial boundaries nor superiorities in Islam. Islam transcends differences of ethnicity, race and culture. Based upon all these satisfactions, Imam Talib took an active role both at the Mosque and in writing for the *Western Sunrise*, and his articles for the newspaper were largely about “centering Islam within the context of the black social and political and cultural experience.”¹⁶⁰ Imam Talib Abdur Rashid explained that the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, of which he is the Imam, has supported “a mainstream, balanced Islamic understanding and experience that is based on a strong social justice platform.”¹⁶¹

Al-Islam further states about Imam Talib Abdur Rashid, “he attempted to teach his followers as well as implement an Islamic way of life that would uplift his people out of bondage, discrimination and demonization and enable them to excel and reach their full potential.”¹⁶² Imam Talib Abdur Rashid is also known as the imam whose “primary mission clarifying the true message of Islam from the race-based ethno-religious doctrine of Islam promulgated by the NOI.”¹⁶³

Al-Islam mentions how Islam reconciles religious and ethnic identity with an *ayat* from the Qur’an, which makes a believer both embrace his/her cultural, ethnic, national and racial identity and regard these identities as a creation of God: “All Muslims are a single brotherhood and sisterhood and I am your Lord, so worship Me.” (*the Qur’an* - 21/92).¹⁶⁴ Thus, Muslims believe that belonging to *ummah* (international Muslim community) is beyond any race, ethnicity, or culture. Al-Islam states how some African American Muslims with the notion of *asabiyya* (ethnic togetherness) emphasize their

blackness along with Islam. On the other hand, some of them regard *asabiyya* as being opposed to the teachings of the Qur'an and the notion of *ummah*.¹⁶⁵

h. Abdur Rauf

Another conversion narrative told by Amir Al-Islam is Abdur Rauf's. He was a personal friend and confidant of Imam Taufiq. He met the Imam Taufiq in 1962 in Harlem.¹⁶⁶ Before converting to Islam, he used to be a Baptist and later a Catholic. Abdur Rauf met Muslims when he was in military service in 1956. He first saw Muslims "being locked up because of their refusal to join." As this was his introduction to Islam and he witnessed their Islamic duties and appealed by their dedication. When he was discharged from the military at the age of twenty-two he met Imam Taufiq at a restaurant where the Imam would regularly visit.¹⁶⁷ Even though he was introduced to Islam a few times before, Rauf converted to Islam after his conversations with Imam Taufiq. After his conversion, he was still "hustling" in streets of Harlem, but he finally left behind his street life and became an active member of the Mosque. Later he became chief advisor and confidant to the Imam Taufiq.

Abdur Rauf had a hard life. His mother put him out of his home in New York City when he was ten years old: "He slept on staircases, on trains, and picked up bottles, cleaned stoops, and ran errands just to survive in the big city."¹⁶⁸ "Al-Islam stated: "he was a pimp and he stayed in the 'life' from 10 to 48 years old."¹⁶⁹ He first met Imam Taufiq when he was twenty but took *shahada* when he was thirty years old. And a little after his conversion, he got rid of his street life. Al-Islam compares Abdur Rauf's extraordinary life to Malcolm X's because his white teacher also discouraged Malcolm when he expressed that he wanted to be a lawyer. However, Rauf worked hard in the

“Islamization process of some African Americans and demonstrates the power of Islam to transform. Currently Abdur Rauf is one of the leading African American developers in New York, truly a story of great transition, reform and development.”¹⁷⁰

i. Dr. Halime Toure

Amir Al-Islam narrates the life of Dr. Halime Toure who is an African American Muslim convert. She was introduced to Islam first by her husband at the time when she joined an *Eid* celebration. She had already met Dr. Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X’s wife, at the United Nations. At the *Eid* she attended, she was influenced by “the international brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam” among Muslims from all over the world, which was different, Al-Islam states, from her religious experience at the A.M.E. Church.¹⁷¹ She converted to Islam in 1970. Toure was an active member of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood. She wrote for the newspaper, taught in the school and served as a secretary of the Mosque. She later became the chairman of Board of the Mosque. Al-Islam states because MIB has an African American centered approach to Islam, she could keep her “black identity at MIB without it conflicting with Islam. And, she was able to continue her commitment to black freedom and liberation as a poet, writer and activist in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement and still be a Muslim.”¹⁷²

j. Ayesha (pseudonym)

In her 2008 doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Southern California in 2008, Wyonna Majied-Muhammad Martinez interviews several African American Sunni women. One of them, Ayesha, states that in converting to Islam she had no interest in copying Middle Eastern culture. She wants to have her own way of African American culture. Ayesha says in the interview: “Allah didn’t say that we had to give up

our culture [...] We just had to make sure that we weren't going against the fundamentals of Islam."¹⁷³ Ayesha also stated that it was important for her to be a part of a group that was doing something positive for themselves, their families, and their community. This was one of the reasons why she converted to Islam. She also expressed "commitment to the religion and the ethical consistency of Muslims was attractive; their involvement in community activities was attractive."¹⁷⁴

Wyonna Majied-Muhammad Martinez relates that another interview subject said that "black people have been oppressed worldwide, and their exclusion from society's good in the United States were not so different from the same patterns in South African apartheid." The author stated that this woman and other woman interviewees regarded Islam as "panacea." Islam is appealing to women "who have a social consciousness related to the best interests of the community and the ethnic group and to how freedom, justice and equality operate in the world and in regard to Ultimate Things."¹⁷⁵

k. Imam Samuel Ansari

Edward E. Curtis IV conducted interviews for his article, "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity." Imam Samuel Ansari, who is the leader of St. Louis's Masjid al-Mu'minun, which was the formerly the Nation of Islam Temple No. 28 but is now brought into line with W.D. Muhammad, said the following:

Our circumstances are very parallel to what his was, and he came to a station of dignity through accepting Islam and became a very close companion of the Prophet... And it's synonymous, I think that's the proper term, it's synonymous with us trying to gain our dignity and our station of dignity in America –that if we would come to right guidance, come to a call, whether you become Muslim or not is not important, but it means coming to the call that is calling you to dignity, to integrity, to live to employ principles in your life... I heard the Imam [W. D.

Muhammad] talk about it once. He said that Bilal wasn't just a slave; Bilal was an obedient slave. You know, he was a good slave... He obeyed his master up until he heard the call to Islam and the message of what Islam offered, and then, after that, he could no longer accept it. See, and that's the way most of the people, the African Americans who truly convert or revert back to Islam... they can no longer be willing to subjects of the Caucasians or people who want to employ or put them in subjected situations, you know. And now you have to treat me with the same respect that you treat anybody and everybody else, and I will not accept anything short of that... So, I still feel that Bilalian is a better term to identify as ethnic group than even African American.¹⁷⁶

Bilal ibn Rabah al-Habashi was a black slave. When he accepted Islam, he was in the house of a non-Muslim who was also a vicious enemy of Islam. That is why Bilal al Habashi was himself persecuted. He was the first *mu'adhdhin* (caller to prayer) and one of the closest friends of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).¹⁷⁷

Curtis explains that for Imam Samuel Ansari the term “Bilalian” meant “proper ethical behavior, self-determination and liberation, submission to God, and self-respect.” He relates what Bilal ibn Rabah experienced in Arabia with compares that with what African Americans do in the United States. According to Samuel Ansari, there is an analogy between the two. He believes that it is better for African American Muslims to call themselves as “Bilalian” rather than “African American” because by so doing they can gain their dignity and self-respect the same way Bilal ibn Rabah did after his conversion to Islam.¹⁷⁸

1. Imam Mustafa Yunus Richards

Akbar Ahmed narrates the story of another African American Sunni Muslim, Imam Mustafa Yunus Richards, the imam of Masjid Hasebullah in Las Vegas, who accepted Islam as his religion when he was forty years old.¹⁷⁹ He had had an unfortunate poverty-stricken life in Detroit before his conversion. He had an interest in religious

issues and had read about different belief systems. He had even spent time with different religious groups including the Nation of Islam. Their teaching that “white man is devil” did not gratify his heart. Later, he moved from Detroit to Las Vegas. He became a card dealer in a casino. He witnessed the vices of casino life: gambling, drugs, nudity, and prostitution. One day he got a copy of the Qur’an, read it and found the answers he had been looking for. He began to learn more about Islam. He then quit his job as a card dealer.¹⁸⁰ He studied Arabic and memorized the Qur’an and became a respected *imam*.

Imam Mustafa thinks that Islam is a solution to the social problems of alcoholism and drug use. He also thinks that

African Americans who fall prey to the deliberate attempt of the ‘white man’ to destroy their moral caliber through drugs, alcoholism, and prostitution, which has led to divorce, teenage pregnancy, early deaths, and often despair, can be saved by Islam, just as he was saved by it.¹⁸¹

As he was well acquainted with the life in Las Vegas, “he believed it was possible to transcend these challenges with his religion.” Akbar Ahmed stated Imam Mustafa expressed several times: “Islam saved my life, ” and Akbar stated that this was the expression that he heard very often from many African Americans throughout their conversion journeys.¹⁸²

Akbar Ahmed states African American Muslim converts made life-changing decisions by converting to Islam. They rightfully carry with them their African American background. Reconciling religious and ethnic identity has been a struggle at times for many African American Muslims. For that reason, Ahmed states African American Muslims in the United States confront a frame of analysis different from that of immigrant Muslims.¹⁸³

m. Imam Siraj Wahhaj

Imam Siraj Wahhaj of Masjid At-Taqwa in Brooklyn, New York and vice president of the Islamic Society of North America (MANA) was previously a minister in the Nation of Islam, and then followed W. D. Muhammad into Sunni Islam.¹⁸⁴

Imam Siraj Wahhaj is a native of Brooklyn, born in 1950. Before his conversion to Islam, his name was Jeffrey Kearsse and he had been raised a Christian. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an important personality for him. He used to read about him and listen to his speeches on the radio on “the Christian ideal of sacrifice in pursuit of social justice.”¹⁸⁵ Wahhaj had an interest in art and music when he was in high school. He then received a partial scholarship to New York University to study math and art, his minor. Before going to college, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and this had a deep effect on him. In college, he met Jeffrey 10X, who was a member of the Nation of Islam.¹⁸⁶

In 1970s, he worked in the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan and also dropped out of the university to continue his work for the Nation. After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975 and with the encouragement of W. D. Muhammad, he studied traditions and beliefs of the orthodox Islam and then changed his name into *Siraj Wahhaj*, which means ‘bright light.’¹⁸⁷

Imam Siraj Wahhaj preaches “a faith of personal responsibility and hard work. He urges former criminals to reform, and he condemns liquor, drugs, gambling and pornography.”¹⁸⁸ He is also known as the imam who raised money for almost every mosque. He is a famous Muslim figure among Muslim university student groups.¹⁸⁹ He retained good relations with the neighborhood. He indicated that one day a non-Muslim

African American woman came to the mosque and told him, “she used to hate Muslims but now loves them because of their work in the neighborhood.”¹⁹⁰ Imam Wahhaj also complains about what he experienced as both an African American and as a Muslim: “I suffered through being an African American second-class citizen, and we got past a lot of that, but now we get the Muslim hits, so here we go again.”¹⁹¹

Akbar further stated Imam Wahhaj spoke on behalf of America. He regards America as his home and he considers himself as part of American culture. To him, America is a “place of freedom and opportunity.” He refuses to “damn America.” He stated that he truly wants America to prosper:

This is what I think most Americans don’t understand. So when President Bush says something simplistic like ‘they don’t like us, they hate our freedom,’ you’re crazy. It has nothing to do with hating your values. We don’t like the corruption, admittedly. We don’t like places like Sin City, prostitution, admittedly [...] We don’t like the corruption, just like Christians and Jews don’t like it either, but we don’t hate America. We don’t like some of the policy of our government toward Muslims around the world, but we don’t hate America. Not at all. I love this country. This is my country as much as it ‘s anyone else’s.’¹⁹²

Related to his experience as a Muslim in the United States, Imam Wahhaj narrates a story from Prophet Muhammad “in which a number of people are in a boat and someone starts to drill a hole. The Prophet said that if you stop that person, you save him and everyone else, including yourself. The question for Muslims, then, is ‘What can we add to make America better?’”¹⁹³

n. Mike (pseudonym)

Akbar Ahmed also conducted an interview with a Muslim inmate, Mike in Los Angeles County. Mike was in his fifties at the time of the interview. He is originally from Arkansas. He was sentenced to prison when he was eighteen years old. He had then been

in and out of prisons for the past three decades. Mike stated after a few years having a life in prison, he began a quest for rehabilitating himself and became a Muslim. He explained that a film about Ahmed Deedat, a South African Muslim who publicly argued against Christianity, had been influential. Mike was very passionate about books. This passion led him to read more about on Islam, too. He first read the Qur'an and since, his conversion, many books on Islam. Mike stated that for him Islam meant "honesty, compassion, and an education." In addition, his favorite book was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and America, for him, was "a wonderful place to live..."¹⁹⁴

o. Zipporah (pseudonym)

In her book about African American Muslim women, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*, Carolyn Moxley Rouse conducts an interview with Zipporah (pseudonym). Although Zipporah's family was a member of the Nation of Islam and insisted that she be a part of it, she did not involve herself. Her parents divorced and both her mother and father remarried. She then lost her mother. She explained these are the things that led her to embrace Islam. She also stated:

. . . because I had a need to be appreciated for who I was, like my mum should have been; accepted because I had a lot of qualities that she had. I had all that fire from both her and my dad, and I had to channel it in positive ways that seemed to be acceptable. So I think that was part of my ascension because I believe firmly Allah puts us in places. We think sometimes it's a very bad spot, but we have to figure out the lesson that is to be learned in this spot."¹⁹⁵

Zipporah's brother-in-law was influential in leading her to Islam. Her brother-in-law lived in Minnesota, and he was an African American Sunni Muslim. He was shot to death when he was building the *masjid*. Affected by her brother-in-law's death, she believed there are reasons behind everything and that nothing comes with any purpose. She also

thought there were signs behind her brother-in-law's death. In her own words: "It was a sign to me that I really needed to make that move right now. I mean I had been teeter-tottering for years."¹⁹⁶ Zapporah became a Muslim in 1984. In her reflections on her conversion Zipporah said, "Islam has empowered me. I didn't know that I have the right to be who I wanted to be, and that some of the things that I thought were negative qualities about myself were really not."¹⁹⁷ Interestingly Zipporah also understands a *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad "paradise is at the foot of the mother" as "the position and power that Allah gave us to teach and nurture and raise society as a whole makes [Islam] an empowering kind of thing for me."¹⁹⁸

D. African American Male Sunni Muslims who were interviewed by Brian L.

Coleman

Besides these public figures, other less well-known individuals have provided narratives relevant to the African Americans Muslim conversion experience. Brian L. Coleman conducted interviews with African American Muslim men living in Philadelphia. Coleman offers significant findings about the issue of identity and Sunni Islam. He further states that each year African Americans provide significant numbers of Islamic converts.¹⁹⁹ To form a basis for his interview analysis, Coleman mentions the role of race in American society, particularly how "race has consistently played a prominent role in US history as a line of demarcation." The question of race led to the Civil War and to civil rights movement, and it has been the source of many intense debates. It still continues to influence and act as an instrument for organizing people's lives in the United States.²⁰⁰ Coleman interviewed twenty-one African American Sunni converts, and I shall

reference six of Coleman's interview subjects as they are relevant to the African American Muslim conversion experience.

a. Kaamil

One of Coleman subjects, Kaamil, describes the benefit of brotherhood as critical to his decision to participate in Muslim community life. In Kaamil's own words:

. . .it got me to understand how strong the sense of the brotherhood that Islam puts on a person or group of individuals. I really started to see that there is a certain way that you deal with people when you, like if I have a friend that is Muslim here and a friend that is non-Muslim here, it is a stronger bond when you really understand and really study and know the type of brotherhood that even the prophet and his companions "Peace be upon him and his companions" and the type of love they had for each other. When you really get to understand it and know that is what helped me to understand how serious it was...²⁰¹

Kaamil's emphasis on the bond of brotherhood among his African American Muslim friends and its comparison to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions' is considerable. Being a Muslim requires obeying the Qur'an and *hadith* as reliable sources as well as the *sunna* (the life, teachings, advices, and confirmations of the Prophet), which offer the Prophet Muhammad's life as an example. This sense of brotherhood creates a sense of unity among Muslims. Kaamil also states:

Because I was like, I was kind of a knuckle head for lack of a better word, I was really out there, I was really, really, really reckless. So now that they see the change, they would rather have me be Muslims and have some type of stability and live my life better as opposed to be non-Muslim and running around and doing some of the things I was doing before.²⁰²

b. Muntasir (pseudonym)

Another interviewee, Muntasir, draws attention to the point of a sense of being part of *ummah* (Islamic international community):

... if my wife, if we produce some more doctors, then we produce some more doctors because she earns a good living. But the ultimate goal is that she would

produce some more doctors is so that my wife can go in front of Muslim women [doctors], so [Muslim women] won't be ashamed; this is why she is producing them. Now if we can, the ultimate goal should be preached for the betterment of Islam. So if you want to be a nurse you should be a nurse, if you want to help society and have good living, but at the top of that list should be that because it is going to help Islam. Now when you go to college you don't go and say I am going to college so I can make all this money, you go and the objective still has to be the benefit of Islam.²⁰³

The universality of Islam and the sense of solidarity that Islam creates for its members are important. Muntasir also states:

Because Islam made me concentrate on how I deal with people, you know how I deal with people, how I speak to people, I am real conscious about how people view me. I wasn't conscious about how people viewed me back in the day coming up, it didn't matter...²⁰⁴

Muntasir states another similar point:

The Prophet said that whoever acknowledges his nationalism, racism, sexism, is not from us. So he, the epitome of not being a part of geographical place, race has no place in Islam. However different societies of people, be you African American, be you Jamaican, be you Arab or non-Arab, whatever, people still have that stigma and in that stigma it prevents them, it may even hamper them, or may cause them some sin, from going all the way into Islam.²⁰⁵

c. Salah (pseudonym)

Salah, another participant, notes:

...if people don't make the effort to note the distinction, they will only continue to go on with their misconceptions unless they make a real effort to see that it [Islam] has nothing to do with blackness at all... again, we believe it's from God. This is our answer. As simple as it sounds, this is an act of God.²⁰⁶

d. Faud (pseudonym)

Another of Coleman's interview subjects, Faud, regarding the issue of society's views of African American Muslims, noted:

The first challenge, realistically we still have a lot of people in America who are racist towards African Americans, and you have that obstacle, it's not really a major, major obstacle like it might have been for my grandparents and stuff like,

that but you still run into racism as being an African American, and on top of that if you display an identity of a Muslim or you let people know that you're a Muslim on top of you being an African American you are running into some scenarios where a person will treat you in a disrespectful manner. For myself, certain stores I can go in dressed like this and I may not have a problem, they'll be extra friendly with me and I may come in with my thobe [an ankle-length robe with long sleeves worn by some Arab men] on and it will be a different type of treatment by the same person [...] It's a reality. Some guys look at it as two obstacles that you're going to run into in life where number one you're African American, and you're a Muslim. You've got two types of discriminations that will come your way and it's true. But at the same time it shouldn't stop you from going and seeking out opportunities and it shouldn't cause you to act ignorant or in a negative manner if somebody treats you differently due to being an African American or being a Muslim or a combination of both.²⁰⁷

Coleman states that even though not all participants noted that they faced strong discrimination after 9/11, five of the participants, including Faud, did report feeling like double minorities: one as an African American and another as a Muslim. However, in contrast to immigrant Muslims who think they are regarded in society primarily as Muslim, African American Muslims believe they are primarily regarded as African Americans and secondarily as Muslims.²⁰⁸

e. Zaafer (pseudonym)

But there's certain baseline integrity that requires you to be different if you have convictions or beliefs about what it is to be a man, especially a man who's surrendered to God's Will. You will be tested. You will be tested and challenged by the values of the dominant culture; how to treat women; what constitutes a good time; what constitutes having fun. It's on many, many levels. What's the ultimate value in life? What should you be working for? What kind of goals should you have? All these things are defined and shaped for man by the vision of the Qur'an when He describes the role of Caliph [Islamic leader]... On concentric circles your environment starts with your own household. Is your house in order? Are you taking care of meeting all your responsibilities? Then you can't be selfish. You have to think about the larger community. You have responsibilities to them. That is the Caliph. The Caliph also, in his vision, is in the whole earth. But practically we're talking about taking care of yourself, our families, our community; and taking care of them spiritually, intellectually, physically. These are some of the responsibilities of manhood. It's less abstract when you see it.

One reason Malcolm was so attractive is because you could look at Malcolm and you could say, “Yeah, there is it. That’s the kind of man that is Caliph.”²⁰⁹

This interview subject, Zaafer, experienced Islam as it provides a sense of community, and his remarks show a shift from being self-oriented toward seeing the benefits of community.

Zaafer disapproves of those who completely deny their racial/black identity and identify themselves with their religious preference:

Then you have the Muslims, some of this new kind of African-American Muslims, who are, like, “Oh, don’t bring me that black stuff. I’m only interested in... It isn’t addressing black and white. The only thing that matters is whether you’re a disbeliever or a believer. Are you a *kuffa* or a *kafir*, or a disbeliever, or believer? That’s the only distinction I recognize.”²¹⁰

f. Abaan (pseudonym)

Another participant Abaan states:

There was a Muslim who actually said, “I’m not black, man. I’m Muslim.” He basically cut himself off. Some people have that type of mindset; that race doesn’t matter that we’re this or that and we live here. It’s not about the community; it’s just about us being Muslims; and we need to make everybody Muslim. That’s kind of their political ideology.²¹¹

Abaan’s racial consciousness, which he thinks works in a different way from religious identity, asks the question “which one should work as the key marker of identity in an African American Muslim’s identity: religion or race? Or, can both work together? Or, which one holds the primary significance? Related to this point, Al-Islam states that the Prophet Muhammad’s warnings against *asabiyya* (ethnic togetherness) were meant to form a sense of community beyond tribal and ethnic relations among believers. There should not be any racial superiority among the believers except those who are the most righteous. As it is mentioned in the Qu’ran, the Prophet Muhammad’s message is

universal and he is the prophet of all humanity. Therefore, no ethnic, racial or cultural groups are privileged in Islam, since such distinctions are antithetical and contradictory to the universality of Islam.²¹²

Abaan also stated:

You're persecuted for whether you're black or whether you're Muslim. It really doesn't make a difference. You'll be persecuted. When 9/11 happened it just gave you another thing to worry about. First you thought you might not get the job because you were black; now you might not get the job because you're black and you're Muslim. Or you might be pulled over because you're black or you might be pulled over and arrested because you're black and you're Muslim. Or you might be detained because you're Muslim you might be not allowed to fly on a certain plane because you're a Muslim. If you had any type of paranoia before, you just have a little bit more paranoia now after September eleventh.²¹³

E. Conclusion

In concluding the chapter, it needs to be emphasized that the converts either before their conversion or after their conversion experienced the positive contributions of Islam to the construction of identity.

For example, Coleman states that thirteen interviewees out of twenty-one declined the importance of race in their Islamic identity as a concept. These participants are of the opinion that race exists as a concept and they describe themselves as black men; however, they do not regard race as major indicator of their identity. Yet some younger participants "still expressed a communal concern for those in African American community, though they did not appear to give race the same level of significance given to it by older Muslim men in their respective *masjids*."²¹⁴

These interviewees, Coleman notes, overall thought that they already subjected to discrimination because of their race and converting to Islam added another dimension of

discrimination. As African American Muslims noted that rather than their religious choice they were more likely to be exposed to discrimination because of their race.²¹⁵

Coleman suggests possible explanation for these young converts who does not acknowledge race as the major identification and says, “They simply do not feel that they are in any way benefited by continuing to identity with a category that thus far brought them little benefit.” Even if the participants recognized a racial identity, the idea of the *ummah* turned out to be important for them. The *ummah* is “race-neutral,” allowing individuals the opportunity to create a new sense of self, which they have not been allowed to do in the mainstream culture.²¹⁶ The participants pointed to the fact Islam formed a sense of brotherhood and respect led Coleman to suggest that converting to Islam allowed African American Muslims to reject everything negative that had been attributed to their race. They are willing to rethink the religion-race identity they thought Islam gave them and reduce their racial identity.²¹⁷

Evidence suggests that younger African American converts are more willing to differentiate between religious and racial identity, and Imam Marwan, another participant, notes the reason for decoupling religion and culture stems from the influence of the Nation of Islam. These participants regard it to be unorthodox and not representative of true Islam:

With their teaching of Islam they also brought their culture. They never saw the need to delink their culture from their religion. You ask any one of them, “Are you a Muslim?” “Yes.” “What’s your nationality?” “Oh, I’m Egyptian.” “Oh, I’m Pakistani.” “Oh, I’m Kashmir.” They never felt for one minute that they had to give up their national identity to embrace this universal Islam, but the African American is schizophrenic about this... They don’t want to embrace an African-American identity.... So all they’re left with is this sort of nebulous Islamic identity that comes in with other cultural influences.²¹⁸

On the other hand, Amir Al-Islam states the fact that even though the Prophet Muhammad aimed to bring together all believers, he didn't mean "Muslims should not recognize, celebrate, honor, identify with and take pride in their tribal, ethnic, national, and... racial heritage." He is of the view that there are some practices of other ethnicities or tribes that are not contradictory to the teachings of Islam. Therefore, they can be incorporated into Islam. However, Al-Islam emphasizes that especially some African Americans who claim themselves to be Salafi (a fundamentalist Muslim group) claim that any ethnic or tribal identification is contradictory to Islam: they can only be part of the *ummah*, the universal Muslim community; they do not recognize any ethnic and racial differences.²¹⁹

As is the case with the narratives above, the Pew Research Center survey indicated that not all the converts emphasized the importance of being an American together with being a Muslim. The Pew Research Center's Muslim American survey in 2011 showed that 49% of African American Muslims considers themselves first as a Muslim then an American, compared to 33% who feel that they are first an American and secondly a Muslim; about 15% feels both simultaneously.²²⁰

Amaney Jamal in her work on mosque participation among American Muslims found that religious institutions play important roles in the political mobilization of American Muslims.²²¹ However, this is not the case among African American Muslims. Jamal emphasizes that mosque involvement for African American Muslims "neither increases in levels of political activity nor civic involvement."²²² Nevertheless, her findings show that Arab American and African American Muslims' mosque participation are related to their perception that "the mainstream society is both disrespectful and

intolerant of Muslims.”²²³ Despite not leading to mobility in political participation, mosque participation is crucial for African American Muslims as it creates a stronger sense of group consciousness.²²⁴ Jamal relates this lack of mobility in political participation to the history of African Americans Muslims. The discrimination and racism they experienced have made them skeptical of the political process in the United States. Yet, mosque participation is important in terms of group consciousness and collective identity.²²⁵

In a case study carried out in mosques in the United States in the year 2000, African American Muslims are identified as among the dominant ethnic groups in mosques.²²⁶ The same study shows that African Americans hold the biggest percentage (63%) of converts in the mosques.²²⁷

African Americans regard mosque participation as adding to their sense of identity. It is also significantly affects African American Muslim leadership in prison programs and anti-drug/anti-crime activities.²²⁸ Two-thirds of Imams who are mosque leaders are of African American background.²²⁹

Coleman’s research agrees with that done by Amaney Jamal on the subject of political participation and engagement of Muslim Americans. Jamal indicates that since African Americans have experienced discrimination because of their race, they have always remained doubtful about the political process in the United States. That’s why they are not so willing to go into politics. Jamal states that going to a mosque for an African American Muslim are more related to group consciousness that it is to gaining political benefits. African American Muslims are of the opinion that Islam is already “a defense against racism.” That’s why, despite not having a political agenda, they support

outreach activities.²³⁰ To sum up, Hakeem Lumumba states Islam has granted many African Americans with “a new sense of cultural pride, racial identification, and spirituality.”²³¹

Chapter 3

Data Analysis

A. Introduction

This chapter is a content analysis of the conversion narratives of African American Sunni Muslims that were presented in the second chapter. In this chapter, the research questions will be applied to the data collected from the narratives of African American Sunni Muslims and interpreted using the research questions formulated in Chapter 2. The methodology section presented in the last chapter performs two vital functions for this study. First it identifies questions with which to interrogate the different narratives that focus in some part or in large part on the conversion of African Americans to Sunni Islam. The narratives were selected and presented with the methodological questions in mind. Secondly, the methodology makes it possible to analyze the narratives in light of the methodology. In this chapter, the six criteria will be used to elicit information from the narratives and show how the narratives address the issues directly relevant to the methodological questions. Here we can shorthand the questions with identifiers and explain how they are relevant to the narratives we examined. The six criteria and research questions include the following aspects:

1. Motives for Conversion.

-What were their motives to convert to Islam?

2- The Meaning of Islam for converts.

-What does Islam mean to them?

3- Respect with and beyond spirituality.

- Do they think Islam, as a religion is a way of spiritual life

and they have gained recognition and respect via converting to Islam?

4- World Community member.

- How are their experiences as being part of *ummah* (the worldwide Muslim community)?

5- Pride in dual heritage.

-Does Islam give them a proud heritage as being both an African American and a Muslim?

6- Religion and Identity in Experience.

-Do they think that religion and identity work together, that is, how has it worked in their personal experience with Islam both as a Muslim and an American?

Let me summarize: The converts' motives to embrace Islam; what Islam means to them; how they perceive Islam as a way of spiritual life style and how they have gained recognition and respect via converting to Islam; their experiences as being part of the *ummah*; Islam as a proud heritage for being both African American and Muslim; and religion and identity working together through the lens of personal experience and how they consider their American and Muslim identity: all of these issues relevant to the conversion experience are taken into consideration.

This is a qualitative study. The data are collected from already conducted-interviews, news, and narrative stories of African American Sunni Muslims. The approach applied in order to analyze the data is interpretative. Twenty-one conversion narratives have been textually analyzed and interpreted below. The narratives are

regarded as responding to the research questions; and the effort here is to understand the conversion of African American Muslims in order to find how Islam has contributed to the subjects' ethnic identity.

As a result of a careful and detailed analysis and interpretation of the data collected from distinct sources about the conversion narratives of African American Sunni Muslims, some of the research questions are answered; on the other hand, some remain unanswered. In order to do an objective analysis of the conversion stories, direct quotations from the original narratives are given if possible. When it is not possible, the stories are paraphrased in order to relate them in a more general way to the research questions. As the researcher did not conduct the interviews, the narrators' stories may not directly respond to all six of the research questions. Therefore, percentages, proportions, or hard numerical figures are not given. Narrative analyses of the participants or respondents are to be approached in terms of their interpretation.

The next steps to examine the narratives presented in the last chapter and see which of the concerns put forward in the six research questions are in fact present in the narratives. We shall then provide a presentation of the data before drawing conclusions in the last chapter.

B. The Analysis of the Narratives

a. Malcolm X

The narrative of Malcolm X explicitly answers to Question 1: Malcolm's motive to embrace Sunni Islam was to witness "the spirit of brotherhood" and "the lack of color-consciousness and non-racist attitudes among Muslims." He, in his pilgrimage to Mecca, acknowledged that Islam eliminates racism. Islam for Malcolm was not accepted for

political purposes, and he did not believe that Islam could be a solution for every political problem. This illuminates the meaning of Islam for Malcolm X (Question 2). Also, the point of conversion to Sunni Islam for Malcolm X was to have a spiritual and religious way of life rather than having a politico-ethno religious propaganda (Question 3). In the narrative a clear answer is given for how identity and religion worked together for Malcolm X: it is stated that although Black Nationalism cannot be incorporated into orthodox Islam, Malcolm X is the best example of one whose spiritual and political personality demonstrated that political identity and religion can work together. In the narrative it is further stated that Malcolm X's Islamic approach after his pilgrimages strengthened his stance towards his blackness; yet, he eliminated his earlier rejectionist views of whites (Question 6). Malcolm X's experience with Muslims across the world in Mecca was his motive to embrace Sunni Islam. In his narrative, Malcolm X shows that *ummah* meant that there should not be any superiority among ethnicities and that Islam, as a universal religion, should bring people from different parts of the world together and thus remove racism. This was Malcolm X's experience with worldwide community of Muslim (Question 4).

Summary: Malcolm X's narrative gives clear answers to the questions 1,2,3,4 and 6.

b. Imam W. D. Muhammad

Question 1 (Motives for Conversion) is not explicitly responded by W. D. Muhammad; however, it is known his conversion to Sunni Islam occurs after his constant reading of the Qur'an and research on Islam, which also led him to move away from the heterodoxy of Nation of Islam toward Sunni orthodoxy. The Imam believed that Islam should enclose every aspect of their life, and a Muslim should determine his or her

actions according to Islamic perspective; Islam, therefore, is relevant to politics and not simply to spirituality, and this is what makes Muslims “independent thinkers” (Question 3) so that they can contribute to Islam in America as African American Muslims (Question 6). The Imam also wished that America would be a place where Muslims feel comfortable and where they can confidently call themselves as “American Muslims” (Question 6).

Summary: The Imam W. D. Muhammad’s narrative indirectly and positively responds to the Question 1, and directly to the Questions 3, and 6.

c. Keith Ellison

The Ellison narrative gives clear motivation for conversion in his “not feeling comfortable with his Catholic Heritage” (Question 1, Motives for Conversion). His statement about being “drawn to the multi-national congregation” goes to Question 4, which deals with the Community. He was “looking for other things” and talks about re-discovery, raising issues about spiritual meaning, Question 3. He does not mention a proud dual heritage but identifies with being an American and a Muslim, not specifically an African- American. He clearly sees religion and identity working together (Question 6) in his concluding statement in the narrative.

Summary: Ellison’s narrative responds directly and positively to 1, 3,4, and 6.

d. Andre Carson

The second Muslim representative in the U.S. Congress, Andre Carson, embraced Islam in consequence of his reading the Qur’an, and he was also influenced by the role Islam played in creating a safe neighborhood (Question 1). His specific emphasis on the intellectual and spiritual power of Islam can be read as a response to the Question 2

(meaning of Islam for converts). His concern about the national security of the United States and his wish that Americans should come together regardless of their races, religious beliefs, and social divides to fight against racism, terrorism, and national security threats respond to Question 3. Also, his statement that he is proud to be both an American and a Muslim responds to Question 6.

Summary: The Carson's narrative positively responds to the questions 1, 2, 3, and 6.

e. Dr. Jamillah Karim

The belief that Islam eliminates racism and injustices was stated by Karim as the main motive of African Americans' conversion to Islam. This reason can be read as the motive behind Karim's conversion as well (Question 1). Karim's thought that Islam empowers its adherents since it gives them a sense of responsibility both towards their families and their community responds to Question 3 and thus, an African American Muslim who is aware of his/her responsibilities feels he or she belongs to the American society (Question 6). This notion of "empowerment" can also be interpreted as the meaning of Islam for converts (Question 2). Although the main motive behind the conversion of African Americans is stated to be the lack of racism in Islam, Karim does not assure that racism does not exist among Muslims (Question 4).

Summary: This narrative indirectly responds to the questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6.

f. Dr. Evans

Dr. Evans' motive to embrace Islam (Question 1) was Islam's being a practical solution to the problems of racism and injustice. Dr. Evans' wish that Muslims should lead positive changes in their communities can be read as an answer to the question 3. Also, he wishes for betterment of *ummah*. Thus, he proposes the notion of "mutuality,"

which creates reciprocal support within the *ummah* in the way of seeking for the better for themselves and their community (Question 4).

Summary: The narrative directly responds to the questions 1, 3, and 4.

g. Imam Talib Abdur Rashid

The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood's emphasis on self-determination and black liberation, upliftment, and empowerment was Imam Talib's reason to embrace Islam (Question 1). He pays attention to an interpretation that puts Islam in the center of cultural, political and social experience of black people (Question 2). Also, as the religious leader of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, he advocates an Islamic understanding, which leans on social justice. Imam Talib also advocates an Islamic understanding, which eliminates racism and any barriers that hinder the development of black people (Question 3 and 6).

Summary: Imam Talib Abdur Rashid's narrative directly responds to the question 1, 2, 3, and 6.

h. Abdur Rauf

Abdur Rauf's attraction to the dedication his Muslim friends in military who refused to join military service can be read as the motive for his later-conversion (Question 1). Despite having been a "hustler," he got off the streets after his conversion to Islam (Question 3). He also worked to recruit African Americans to Islam to demonstrate to them how Islam can be transformative (Question 6).

Summary: Abdur Rauf's narrative indirectly responds to the question 1 and positively responds to the question 3 and 6.

i. Dr. Halime Toure

The international brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam among Muslims all over the world at an Eid program was Toure's motive to embrace Islam (Question 1 and 4). Being able to keep her black identity and Muslim identity together responds to the question 6.

Summary: The narrative of Toure openly responds to the questions 1, 4, and 6.

j. Ayesha

Ayesha's motive (Question 1) to convert to Islam was Islamic *ummah* and their involvement in community activities that could make positive changes for families and communities (Question 4). Also, being able to keep her African American identity even after her conversion responds to the question 6. Being part of a group that works for the betterment of themselves, families and their society can be a respond to the question 3. To Ayesha, as the interviewer suggests, the meaning of Islam (Question 2) can be interpreted as "panacea."

Summary: The narrative responds to the questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6.

k. Imam Samuel Ansari

Imam Samuel Ansari states that an African American who truly accepts Islam cannot be the subject of any people who want to put him or her in a subordinated position (Question 2); rather, he or she would gain dignity and self-respect by converting to Islam (Question 3). He further states that *Bilalian* (this is the term the American Society of Muslims used to associate themselves with Bilal ibn Rabah, who was originally from Ethiopia and one of the closest companions of the Prophet Muhammad) is "a better term to identify as an ethnic group than even African American (Question 5). Also he regards

the term “Bilalian” as a way to gain dignity and respect in America because he thinks what Bilal ibn Rabah experienced at the time of Prophet Muhammad is similar to what African Americans experience today (Question 6).

Summary: The narrative answers the questions 2, 3, 5, and 6.

1. Imam Mustafa Yunus Richards

The Imam embraced Islam after he read the Qur’an. Although the Imam himself did not state that he embraced Islam as he saw the corruption that a casino life might cause for somebody, he stated Islam is a solution to “drugs, alcoholism, and prostitution, which has led to divorce, teenage pregnancy, early deaths, and often despair.” Islam is a way to transcend these challenges (Question 1) and he acknowledged: “Islam saved my life” (Question 2). Also, after his poverty-stricken life and his life as a card dealer, he becomes a very respected Imam in Las Vegas (Question 3).

Summary: The narrative answers the questions 1, 2 and 3.

m. Imam Siraj Wahhaj

The Imam embraced Sunni Islam after his studies of traditions and beliefs of the orthodox Islam with the encouragement of W. D. Muhammad (Question 1). Imam Siraj Wahhaj explains they have retained good relations with their neighbors and their non-Muslim neighbors appreciate their hard work in the neighborhood (Question 3). His preaching “a faith of personal responsibility and hard work” goes to question 2. Although the imam states that he regards America as his home and himself as part of American culture, his experience of “double-minority” both as African American and Muslim is a response to Question 6.

Summary: The narrative includes responds to the questions 1, 2, 3, and 6.

n. Mike

As rather a different point from other converts, Mike's reason to accept Islam (Question 1) was a film about a South African Muslim Ahmed Deedat in which Christianity was disputed. To Mike, Islam is "honesty, compassion, and an education" (Question 2). He also thinks that America is "a wonderful place to live" (Question 6).

Summary: The narrative responds to the questions 1, 2, and 6.

o. Zipporah

What Zipporah went through after her parents' divorce and later because of the death of her mother and her brother-in-law, who was a Muslim and shot to death when he was building a *masjid*, led her to embrace Islam (Question 1). Zipporah believes that her conversion empowered her (Question 3) and Islam is an "empowering thing for [her]" (Question 2).

Summary: Zipporah's narrative answers directly the questions 1, 2, and 3.

p. Kaamil

The strong sense of brotherhood among Muslims as stated by Kamil is a response to the question 3. Kaamil further mentions that Islam brought stability to his life and he is now in better position compared to his life before Islam (Question 3). His participation to Muslim community (Question 4) led him to appreciate the importance of brotherhood more. He believes it generates a stronger sense of togetherness and unity among Muslims.

Summary: Kaamil's narrative has responds to the questions 3 and 4.

q. Muntasir

The point Muntasir makes about the *ummah* takes a different direction from what other subjects stated. Interestingly, according to Muntasir, the point of a Muslim having a job or going to college should be to serve Muslims better (Question 4). He also points out that Islam made him more conscious of his treatment of other people (Question 3). He also thinks that race has no place in Islam; therefore, he thinks it is a stigma for someone to emphasize racial identity since doing so may prevent individuals from accepting Islam (Question 2).

Summary: The narrative responds the questions 2, 3, and 4.

r. Salah

Another participant, Salah, is of the view that his conversion to Islam has nothing to do with blackness. His embracing of Islam is more race-neutral (Question 2).

Summary: The narrative responds to the Question 2.

s. Faud

Faud believes that African American Muslims are double minorities: first, as black, and, secondly, as Muslims (Question 6); however, he states that this does not discourage him from looking for opportunities or allow him to act ignorant or to have negative manners when he experiences discrimination (Question 3).

Summary: Faud's narrative answers the questions 3 and 6.

t. Zaafir

Zafir's statement on the idea of sense of group solidarity and community that Islam requires goes to question 2. He disapproves of African American Muslims who

deny their blackness or racial identity but only pay attention to their religious affiliation (Question 3).

Summary: The narrative responds the questions 2 and 3.

u. Abaan

Abaan's standpoint on the issue of race in Islam is noteworthy. He states that he does not basically cut himself off from his race; he can be a black man and a Muslim simultaneously (Question 3). In addition to some other participants, Abaan also stated that he might be discriminated against both as a Muslim and as an African American (Question 6).

Summary: Abaan's narrative answers the question 3 and 6.

These narratives and stories reveal important information about African American Sunni Muslims and their conversion experiences. Nevertheless, as they are collected narratives, while some of the answers are suggestions, some are directly answered. Although not all of the narratives address all six criteria, the narratives provide basic knowledge about motives, the meaning of Islam for converts, the contribution of Islam to identity, their experience with the Muslim *ummah*, and the pride they felt about Africans being involved in the advent of Islam, and convert identity as both Americans and Muslims.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The analysis set out in the last chapter reveals that the six questions do provide insight into the African-American conversion experience. Let us consider the research questions once again, one by one.

On the question of motivation, Question I, the narratives reveal that each convert has his or her own motives to embrace Islam. Not all of the narratives reveal a clear motivation for conversion, and again, the data source for investigation was not the direct questioning of live subjects but an analysis of narratives and stories selected from the literature on African American Muslims. Nevertheless, fourteen out of twenty-one narratives either directly or indirectly stated motivational reasons for accepting Islam.

The fourteen African American Sunni Muslims explain that the motives to embrace Islam involved such matters as the international brotherhood and sisterhood, non-racist attitudes among Muslims, lack of color consciousness in Islam, Islam's being against racism and injustices, and multinational aspect of congregations. These principles mentioned above lead to the conclusion that group solidarity and the encouragement of non-racist attitudes among Muslims are important motives for African Americans embracing Islam.

Besides these motives, a big portion of the fourteen converts stated that their research into Islam and reading the Qur'an helped lead them toward converting to Islam as well.

The participants generally responded indirectly to Question 2 (the meaning of Islam for converts). Thirteen out of twenty-one narratives reveal that the convert has found a positive meaning from their own experience with Islam.

The issue of race undeniably holds a significant place in American society. Based upon this issue, ethnic and racial issues are clearly, although not always, important to identity construction. Identity construction through Islam for African American Sunni Muslims makes the most significant part of the study. My primary aim has been to ethnographically concentrate on the ethnic, cultural and social impact of Islam on African American converts. To meet this concern, the questions 3 (Respect with and beyond spirituality), 5 (Pride in dual heritage) and 6 (Religion and identity in experience) are important issues for the conversion experience.

In their narratives, converts most often talk about the issues raised in Question 3 (Respect with and beyond spirituality): they mention that they somehow gain recognition and respect via converting to Islam and that Islam contributes to their social, political, cultural, and ethnic identity. For example, eighteen out of twenty-one narratives have either a direct or indirect positive response to the question. Question 3 raises issues that are a significant part of this study and that's why being able to find narratives responding to this question is important. Interestingly, some of these twenty-one participants stated that race has no role in Islam or that the pursuit of a racial identity in Islam is pointless. On the other hand, three of other participants stated that they could retain both their black identity and Muslim identity after their conversion; they believe that Islam and African-American-ness or blackness is not incompatible.

Only one participant answered the question 5 (Pride in Dual Heritage). This question is a critical question, but not one I could ask the converts directly. In all but one of the narratives, the question seemed not to be a point of reflection. This question aimed at trying to understand whether Islam provides a proud history with which African Americans could identify. However, since I was not able to ask this question, it showed up in only one conversion narrative. The participant confidently mentions the connection of Bilal ibn Rabah to his Muslim identity. It does not appear that in talking about conversion. Converts to Islam do not readily point to this issue as being as important as others, and more investigation should be done on this particular question.

African-American Muslims in the United States discuss their experiences of identity in Question 6 (Religion and Identity in Experience). Thirteen out of twenty-one participants responded to the question. Even though some participants stated they regard themselves as part of American culture and proud Americans, they also stated they feel they are discriminated against both as Muslims and as African Americans.

By taking into consideration the definition of *ummah* as the universal brotherhood and sisterhood that brings all Muslims together beyond any tribal, ethnic, cultural, or racial identities, Question 4 examines the experiences of African American Sunni Muslims within the international Muslim community. Eight of twenty-one participants responded to the question. Convert narratives reveal a generally positive experience with the Muslim *ummah*. Sometimes, it is the experiences of the participants in *ummah* that provide an actual motive to embrace Islam. For instance, one of the participants states a case related to *ummah*. Although it is not experienced by the participant herself, she states a case in which an African American Muslim woman felt discrimination among

immigrant Muslims, and thus she preferred going to an African American Muslim dominated mosque.

To sum up, the questions that were asked of the twenty-one narratives reveal that the motives for African American embracing Islam can be summarized as brotherhood and the lack of racism in Islam. Islam bears a positive connotation for converts. Also, Islam was generally seen as positively contributing to converts' social, political, ethnic, and religious identity. They also had positive relationship with the Muslim *ummah*. Even though only one of the convert participants mentioned the importance of Africans in Islam, that one conveyed pride that an African, Bilal ibn Rabah, had been a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. As a last point, African American Sunni Muslims generally expressed pride in seeing themselves both as American and as a part of American culture.

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Curriculum Vita

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EDUCATION

Master's, American Studies. Lehigh University, Bethlehem PA, 2011, cont.

Thesis: From Shabazz to Bilalian: African American Muslims' Experience in Twentieth Century

Certificate: The Teacher Development Program, Level One

Seminar: Fulbright Enrichment Seminar in Sacramento: "Ethnicity, Enfranchisement and the Electorate"

Bachelor of Arts, English Language and Literature. Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, 2010.

Thesis: Redeeming the History of Apartheid: The Idea of Relinquishment in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and William Faulkner's "The Bear"

Symposium: The Path of Nonviolence-Two Great Souls in India and South Africa: Gandhi and Mandela

2008-2009 (Fall-Spring Term) LLP-Erasmus student at Dalarna University in Sweden

Conference Assistant at DUCIS (Dalarna University Center for Irish Studies)

Occupational experience,

Held the position of teacher in a private school in Istanbul/TURKEY- 2010-2011

Language skills,

Bilingual (Kurdish and Turkish), Fluent in English, Basic knowledge in Russian and Swedish.

ACADEMIC INTERESTS

Ethnic, religious and cultural issues

African Americans

Popular Literature

Minority Literature

AWARDS

Fulbright Award for Master's Degree at Lehigh University