

RE-DEFINING THE BLACK SELF “THE MUSLIM WAY”

*Conversion from Christianity to Islam among
African-Americans*

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dear son, Emmanuel, most of all for giving me the great joy of being your mother, and for the large amount of patience and inspiration you have given me during my writing period. I love you.

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Life is a great privilege!

Elisabeth Harnes, November, 2009.

1.0 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction

The presented master thesis seeks to develop a better understanding of why African- American is the largest ethnic group among converts from Christianity to Islam in the U.S.¹ Through the method of qualitative interviews I have collected conversion stories which form the empirical base of the thesis. These are analyzed through the lenses of multi-disciplinary analyses with a particular focus on post-colonial theories, sociology of religion and history. I have interviewed 12 U.S born African-American men and women who have converted from different Christian denominations to Islam.

1.2 Religion in the U.S

In the United States the importance of religion has remained strong, despite of having declined in many other developed countries. The religious landscape in the U. S is overwhelmingly Christian, where 3 out of 4 adults consider themselves as Christian,² and the country has the highest level of church attendance in the world. Despite of these facts the percentage of American adults who identify themselves as Protestants dropped below 50% in 2005. Yet, according to statistics, there still appears to be a major increase in the interest in spirituality among North Americans. It is estimated that most Americans would identify themselves as non-religious or non-Christian by the year of 2035.³ Alongside this development it is assumed that Islam will become the dominant religion in the world before 2050.⁴

Islam is rated to be the third largest religion in the U.S,⁵ and the estimated conversion rate among African-Americans is 135.000 per year. Indiana which is the geographical background

¹ Zeya Uzra. "The Growing Presence of American Converts to Islam:" *Washington Reports on Middle East Affairs*, January, 1990, 41.

² Barry A. Kosmine, Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar. "American religious identification Survey". (December 19, 2001). *The Graduate Center of the City University of New York*.
[Http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf).

³ Ontario Consultants on *Religious Tolerance: Trend among Christians in the U.S.*
[Http://www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Pew Forum on public life. *U.S Religious Landscape Survey*. Available from
<http://www.religions.pewforum.org>

to my interviewees, is presented as one of the ten states with the highest concentration of Muslims.⁶

The number of Muslims in the U.S is a hotly-debated issue with political overtones. The U.S Census is prohibited from asking about religious affiliation but different studies suggest from 1.5 to 6 million Muslim. (To make up for the lack of solid numbers, different researches have used different methodologies.) The worldly acknowledged Pew Muslim American Study⁷ estimates that Muslims constitute 0,6 % of the adult population. Or ca. 1, 5 million Muslims 18 years or older living in U.S.⁸ Using further data from the Pew survey and the Census Bureau further estimates that there are approximately 850 000 Muslims under the age of 18 in addition to the 1, 5 million adults, for a total of 2, 35 million Muslims nationwide.⁹ These are the numbers I have used in this thesis.¹⁰

A survey done by Pew Research Center shows that, two, third (65%) of adult Muslim living in the U.S were born elsewhere, and 39% of these have come to the U.S since 1990. A relatively large proportion of Muslims immigrants are from Arab countries, but many also come from Pakistan and other South Asian countries. Among native-born Muslims, slightly more than half are African American (20% of U.S Muslims overall). Many of these are converts to Islam. Among the native born Muslim, 21% have converted to Islam while the last 14% are born Muslim.¹¹

According to the most recent statistics from Pew Research Center, 55% of converts identify with Sunni Islam and another quarter (24%) identify with no specific tradition. Only 6% of Muslim converts in America identify themselves as Shia Muslims.¹²

⁶ American Muslim Perspective. *Muslim Immigration in the USA*. Jan 1th, 2004. Available from <http://www.amperspective.com>

⁷ The Pew Research Center is the first nationwide survey to attempt to measure rigorously the demographics, attitudes and experiences of Muslim Americans. It builds on a survey conducted in 2006 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project of Muslim minority publics in Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain. The Muslim American survey also flows on Pew's global survey conducted over the past five years with more than 30,000 Muslims in 22 nations around the world since 2002.

⁸ Pew Research Center for the people and the press. Survey Report. *Muslims Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*. May 22, 2007:6

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Ibid.,22.

Just 14% of the entire North American population is defined as African-American¹³, nevertheless in today's American society, African-American Muslims are among the fastest growing segments of Islam in the U.S, accounting for about 30% of all American Muslim total. During the last three decades, the American Muslim community has increased at a surprising speed. Through conversions, immigration and natural growth, Islam affiliations have increased. Edward Curtis, an Indiana based historian says Islam is now clearly considered as black American's second faith.¹⁴ The Jewish American Scholar, Jacob Neusner¹⁵ estimated that by the year of 2020 the number of American Muslim will surpass that of American Jews.¹⁶ What I find interesting behind this developing trend is the convert's background; statistics show that the majority of Americans who convert to Islam actually come from Protestant Churches,¹⁷ and are born in the United States (91%). Among the converts almost three-fifth (59%) are African-Americans. This growing pattern stimulates my curiosity. Why does this conversion-trend appeal in such large degree among African-Americans and how is it explained?

1.3 The purpose of the study

The purpose of this thesis is to examine why African-Americans in the U.S are converting from Christianity to Islam. What are their reasons for converting? Is there dissatisfaction with their Christian heritage belonging? What has made them turn to a completely new lifestyle and worldview?

I have interviewed 12 U.S born African-American men and women who have converted from different Christian denominations to Islam. I will explore their conversion stories using a phenomenological approach where my interviewees' subjective experiences are the center of attention.

¹³ "U.S Population Projections. National Population 2008. Report from the U.S Census Bureau Population Projections." *U.S Census Bureau*, 2008. Available from: <http://www.census.gov/population/projects/2008/projection>.

¹⁴ "African-Americans and Islam: growth and change." *ReligionLink.com. Religious story, ideas, and sources*. Posted by Editor, April 16th, 2007.

[Http://www.religionlink.org/tip](http://www.religionlink.org/tip)

¹⁵ b. July 28th, 1932.

¹⁶ Jacob Neusner. *World Religions in America*. 3rd ed (New York: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 180.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center. Religious Survey. (2006), 22 : 67% of all converts to Islam in the U.S came from Protestant Churches, 10% came from Catholicism, and just 5% from other religions. 15% had no religion before their conversion.

The time period (60 and 70`s), which represents the social context of the majority of my informants` conversions illustrates a really unique conversion trend. It shows the arrival of Black Islam among African-Americans in the U.S and the process towards recognition of that form of Islam as a valued religion among African-Americans in North America.

By more closely examining the experience of Muslim converts, I believe one can better understand the appeal and adaptability of religion, as well as the future of the Muslim community in the U.S. As more African-Americans become Muslims, the face of Islam in America will change. New relationships between different groups of Muslim immigrants, their American born children, African-Americans, Latinos and new converts of all cultures and ethnicities emerge and will shape the role of the world`s second largest faith (and especially the role it will play in the U.S).

Another significant facet of the conversion trend is the impact it may have on Christianity and how it will influence the Christian institution in terms of its role, function, framework and impact in the society. On a micro-level, an individual`s awareness and commitment to one`s religion can often be shaped by the surrounding society`s context, negatively or positively depending on how individuals perceive the dominant society. Research on western societies influence on minorities` religious identities, especially in Europe seem to be underestimated, especially thinking of the consequences and change due to immigration of Muslim groups/immigrants entering many homogeneous religious societies, especially in North Europe. Though my study is done on a specific ethnic group in a certain context, focus on conversions among African -Americans will also function as a useful tool in gaining understanding of minority groups` personal experiences in dominant societies, including the religious institutions. The results of the thesis might enhance constructive critique of social majority institutions, including the Christian Church.

1.4 Theoretical framework

The American sociologist McGuire,¹⁸ defines the phenomena “conversion” as following:

¹⁸ Meredith B. McGuire (Ph.D New School for Social Research) is Professor of Sociology at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.

a transformation of one's self concurrent with a transformation of one's basic meaning system.(...) It often changes the sense of who one is and how one belong in the social situation. Conversions also transform the way the individual perceives the rest of the society and his or her personal place in it, altering one's view of the world.¹⁹

It basically means adopting a new religious identity.²⁰

Several personal and situational factors can predispose peoples conversion by making them aware of the extent to which the prior meaning system seem inadequate to explain or give meaning to experiences and events. McGuire points out that by contrast "if individuals can satisfactorily handle experiences and events within the framework of their meaning system, they have no desire to seek alternative meaning system for their lives."²¹The American psychologist and theologian Lewis Rambo underlines that "most people who become involved in religious conversions are in fact active agents, and not passive victims."²² A "seeker" often tries many different alternative believes and practices.²³ The goal of a seeker's journey seems to be at the station where he can find; "the peace for his soul" at the eternal level, to such an extend where he can manage to apply it into a new meaning system which reflects through action on the external surface.

According to McGuire:

a theoretical understanding of how conversion occurs is nevertheless worthwhile, because it reveals much about the connection between the individual's meaning system, social relationships and very identity. Because conversion consist in a change of the individual's meaning system and self, it has social, psychological, and ideational components. The social components consist of the interaction between the recruit and other circles of associates.²⁴

Lewis Rambo argues "conversion to be understood in all its richness and complexity, the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and religious studies must all be taken into account."²⁵

¹⁹ Meredith B. McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*. (Belmont CA: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group 2002),73.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.,74.

²² Lewis Rambo. 1998. *The psychology of religion*. Paper presented at International Coalition for Religious Freedom Conference on "Religious Freedom and New Millennium." Berlin, Germany. May 29-31.

²³ Balch and Taylor. (1977). In Lewis Rambo. *The psychology of religion*.

²⁴ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*,77.

²⁵ Rambo. *Understanding religious conversion*, 7.

Limiting the theories of conversions into one academic discipline, can therefore be a hindrance to give a holistic and fair voice to my interviewees. Therefore in addition to operating with a phenomenological approach, aiming to analyze the phenomena of conversion in the way experienced and seen by my interviewees, I will use perspectives from several academic fields in my research. By the help of an open and qualitative interview approach as the major method for my empirical data, it might be possible to find out how the men and woman explain their conversion process towards Islam.

The field of sociology of religion examines the social and institutional aspects of traditions in which conversions take place, and the interaction between individuals and their environment. These perspectives are useful and relevant, since I in my survey, attempt to focus on the conditions of my interviewees past and current social situation, in order to gain a deeper understanding of their conversion from one monotheistic religion for another. Using theories from the field of psychology of religion, I aim to show how collective crises may have impacted people`s conversions among African-Americans. Post -colonial theories provide insight about oppressed and marginalized peoples` ignored history and show the long standing impact of colonization on contemporary U.S, both at a collective and individual level.

In my thesis I aim to explain conversion in a wider descriptive rather than normative theological perspective. Rambo underlines that by “focusing on a descriptive approach, we can treat conversion as dynamic, multifaceted process of transformation.”²⁶In this thesis I will therefore focus on conversion as a process rather than a special event.

Through letting my interviewees share their conversion stories I will address how the conversion process happened through presenting the socio-cultural and religious background of my informants with special emphasize on the cultural and historical background context. This process will consist of my interviewees` processes in life including minor and major events which have influenced their conversions.

²⁶ Ibid., 17.

Rambo is focusing on four aspects which he argues is the most crucial to understanding a conversion: cultural, social, personal and religious, varying in weight in each particular conversion.²⁷

“The myths, rituals, and symbols of a culture provide guidelines for living, which are often unconsciously adopted and taken for granted.”²⁸ Rambo underlines how culture constructs the intellectual, moral and spiritual atmosphere of life. In my thesis through analyzing the personal aspect of the conversion connected to the cultural context, rituals and traditions within the African- American culture versus the Caucasian culture, and the Muslim versus the Christian context, I aim to examine my interviewees` inner motives for conversion.

Examining the social components for conversion I aim to focus on the micro and macro perspective. From a micro perspective, meaning the private sphere, such as family background presenting important relationships which has influenced the converts. From a macro perspective, in the meaning of examine the interaction between individuals and their environment, and the relationships between individuals and the expectations of the groups in which they are involved.²⁹

Looking at conversion from a psychological perspective, I will use theoretical perspectives from several disciplines with the aim to analyze transformation of self, consciousness and experience in both objective and subjective aspects in my interviewees` life. Since many of my interviewees, through their conversion stories, recalled religious experiences from their family and social upbringing, especially emphasizing on the stigma of being black, I will accentuate the crises and traumas attached to belonging to a black minority in a white dominant society. I will also include perspectives from humanistic and transpersonal psychology which lay emphasis on the way conversion gives a richer self-realization, accentuating the beneficial consequences resulting from conversion. Another perspective which I find important is the historical dimension. According to Rambo does “attention to historical particulars complement theoretical models, providing a substantive and detailed data base of information about conversion and may also help to trace the nature of conversion over time.”³⁰ He underlines

²⁷ Ibid.,7.

²⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lewis R. Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 11.

that “psychology and sociology are generally synchronic rather than longitudinal disciplines, focusing on a particular time without reference to antecedents.”³¹

Historical perspectives have the ability to demonstrate that conversion may be different in different times and places. William Bulliet and Ramsay MacMullen have argued that “converts may have different motives at different times in a particular historical context, not with an aim to question the validity of particular conversion, but rather serve to illustrate the different contour of the process in different times and places in history.”³² For a research on African-Americans this means that their culture cannot be understood without an understanding of the African-American social history and religious figure heads.³³ I aim to provide a deeper foundation in order to understand the social and psychological perspectives of the conversions. This post-colonial perspective provides relevant insight into the developing process of cultures affected by the imperial process from the colonization to the present day. This, I believe will help to put the conversion into a holistic hermeneutical understanding and provide insight into factors influencing the conversion.

Rambo underlines phenomenologically speaking, that interpretations that deny the religious dimension, fail to appreciate the convert’s experience, and attempt to put this experience into interpretive frameworks that are inappropriate.³⁴ He further argues:

If we are to be phenomenologically true to the experience and phenomena of conversion, we must take the religious sphere seriously; we need not capitulate to religious or theological points of view, but we do need to find ways of integrating religion into our analyses; otherwise our examinations of conversion will remain one dimensional. Taking religion seriously does not require *belief*, but it does imply *respect* for the fact that conversion is a *religious* process involving an elaborate array of forces, ideas, institutions, rituals, myths and symbols.³⁵

I have a main focus on post colonial theories, sociology of religion and history of the African-Americans.

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² Ibid., 12.

³³ The metaphor: “figurehead” derives from the carved figurehead at the prow of a sailing ship. (see: <http://en.wikipedia.org>).

³⁴ Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversions*, 11.

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

1.5 Conversion motives

According to Lewis Rambo, “due to research done by psychologists, there is no single motivation that drives people towards conversions, but each individual has different predispositions which further means that some of us “lean into” new religious options in different ways.”³⁶ My interviewees` present a broad specter of motives for their conversion. The American sociologists John Loftland and Norman Skonovd argue that “differing perceptions and descriptions of conversions are not merely the result of various theoretical orientations but are, in fact, descriptions of qualities that make conversion experience substantially different.”³⁷

Loftland and Skonovd identify six motives for conversion; intellectual, mystical, experimental and affection, revivalist and coercive.³⁸ An experimental conversion are suppose to have an active exploration of religious options; potential converts have a “show me” mentality, essentially saying, “I`ll pursue this possibility and see what spiritual benefits it may provide me.”³⁹ According to McGuire are potential converts urged to take nothing on faith, but to try the theology, rituals, and organization for themselves and discover if the system is sure (that is, beneficial or supportive) for them. Through the NOI and the civil right movement era, many of my interviewees also converted through the motives of revivalism which is the fifth motive in Lofland and Skonovd`s model. Lofland and Skonovd give the example of a revival meeting as a model for this motive-revival meetings with emotionally powerful music and preaching, whereas a part of the civil right era where a majority of my interviewees were participants. Muslim sects used this form to attract new converts. It is important to have a broad approach and quest of meaning, in order to understand their process of conversion. As self hood never is independent from its social environment, I have therefore decided to focus on the convert`s conversion story through focusing on their relationship to their family, community/society and Christian background.

1.6 Crises and conversion

³⁶ Lewis Rambo. *The Psychology of Religious Conversion*. San Francisco Theological Seminary delivered at the International Coalition for Religious Freedom Conference on “Religious Freedom and the New Millennium”, Berlin, Germany. May 29-31, 1998.

³⁷ Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversions*, 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*,14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*,14.

Religious conversion is one among several possible resolution of tensions and problems created by a crisis. For instance crises such as serious illness, social disintegration and political oppression, might predict a person to convert to a new meaning system.⁴⁰ As pointed out of several researchers there is a social stigma- or the African-Americans are stigmatized because of racism.⁴¹ In a society where institutionalized social stigma through racism against black African-American has been far more of a rule than an exception, it still is a reality, even after attempts of change. Traumatic experiences often arise from social exclusion both at a micro and macro level. Social stigma is often well hidden and unseen by the white dominant majority, which makes the minority to even internalize the stigmatized experienced situations to a larger degree. Belonging to a black minority in a white dominant society especially in the 60`es and 70`es when most of my interviewees grew up; historical processes such as the civil right movement lead to a high level of social change and reflection, including their religious selves.

By asking men and women about their conversion stories, I have tried to perceive the most significant factors that influenced their personal conversion process towards Islam.

1.7 Reader`s guide

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. *Chapter one*, examines the background and the context on African-American Muslims, also presenting the theoretical framework for the following chapters. In *chapter two*, the methodology used in the thesis will be introduced and discussed, followed by an introduction to the African-American context and history (*chapter three*). Chapter three will also cover the establishment of Muslim denominations in the Black Muslim community in the U.S, including a brief presentation of important historical Muslims leaders within the American Black Muslim community. This specific context may offer insight to African-American`s identity formation, and to my informants` conversion stories which form a background for the analyze. This chapter also contains certain aspects of the slave trade history and the civil right movement, because I find it important to listen to the African-American history as an oppressed people`s story. In that way I might be able to obtain constructive critical understanding of African- Americans` social conditions throughout

⁴⁰ Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 46.

⁴¹ Garbi Schmidt. *Islam in Urban America. Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (Philadelphia, Tempel University Press: 2004), 160.

the history. The civil right movement is a significant historical momentum for the African-American`s human rights development (including the Black Power era), and has shown the strength and cultural struggle which has shaped a black collective identity. In order to understand the complex cultural dilemmas African-Americans often face within their own American society, a focus on the establishment of the first Christian Black denominations through a historical perspective will be relevant. This information might provide the foundation for the next section. *Chapter four* is the first empirical chapter, which explore how black identity is experienced. In this chapter my interviewees` conversion stories will be followed by a discussion of theoretical perspectives. The two chapters which follow will also consist of the same described dynamic between empirical material and theory: *chapter five* investigates to what extent black identity is rooted in national identity, while *chapter six* focuses on why my interviewees left Christianity for Sunni Orthodox Islam. Finally, the conclusions of the thesis are shown in *chapter seven*.

2.0 METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PROCEDURES

2.1 Qualitative interviews

The predominant method which I have used in this thesis is qualitative interviews. More specifically, I have chosen the open ended unstructured qualitative interviews. The qualitative method is “aiming to strengthen the focus on how people analyze and understand a given situation. It is argued that the qualitative method is suitable for revealing an unsolved subject and to develop a more nuanced description of the theme, especially in relation between the individual and the context.” Hence, the qualitative perspective is useful in fields where limited research is done.⁴² Within the frame of every interview there exists a great flexibility; answers on questions will lead to more precise follow up questions.

Even though the interviews are based upon specific themes and concrete questions, the interviews can turn out quite different than expected. In many cases this is caused by another side of qualitative methods; “the actor’s point of view”; which means the openness for the actor’s own world-view, motives, way of thinking, and the acting structure in its diversity of nuances. This shall also in the printed version become represented as trustworthy and authentic as the researcher possible can manage.⁴³

Qualitative methods are more open for new information which often is connected with more inductive approaches, where one move from empirical data to theory.⁴⁴

According to the American sociologist Robert Dingwall, an interview can be understood as “an artifact, a joint accomplishment of interviewer and respondent.”⁴⁵ It is usually divided in several themes or subjects which the researcher has reasons to investigate. The open interview is also termed as a face-to face interview and is enabling a “special insight” into subjectivity,

⁴² Dag Ingvar Jakobsen. *Hvordan gjennomføre undersøkelser? Innføring i samfunnsvitenskapelig metode* (Oslo: Høyskoleforlaget, 2002), 18.

⁴³ Pål Repstad. *Mellom nærhet og distanse* (Oslo: Universitetsforlagets metodebibliotek, 1998), 15.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Murphy and Robert Dingwall. *Qualitative methods and health policy research*. (New York: Walter de Gruyter Inc, 2003), 21.

⁴⁵ Atkinson and Silverman 1997. Quoted in Clive Seale. Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrim and David Silverman. *Qualitative Research Practice*. (London: Sage Production, 1997), 16.

voice and lived experience,⁴⁶ an approach which makes it to a relevant and applicable method for my thesis where individuals` conversion stories are the main subject.

2.1.1. Using a phenomenological approach in religious interviewing.

Qualitative and open-ended interviews make it possible to examine people`s own oral expressions and their religious selves. By asking people about their conversion stories including personal “religious” feeling and experience (and how they explain life changing events like crises and traumas), one may access the role religion plays for them in their everyday-life. According to the American anthropologist, Morton Klass,⁴⁷ one should “examine such (religious) believes in a way that sidesteps the issue of whether or not they are ultimate “correct,” and consider what students of society and religion might learn from an examination of these explanations.”⁴⁸ A clue to the analysis and interpretation of biographical material in the earliest phase of this type of research was the sociologists William Irving and Dorothy Thomas`s well known term; “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Open qualitative interviews, are concerned with understanding the informant`s defined reality as grounded in her social, material and temporal context.⁴⁹ Although this study is influenced by my perception, I have tried to make the interviewees tell their own story. The open ended qualitative interviews, hopefully gives the interviewees the opportunity to reflect upon their view of religion.

The American social anthropologist Morton Klass furthermore highlights what a number of scholars have suggested: that religion encompasses human attempts to explain, interpret, predict, and control phenomena and events.⁵⁰ Hence, one can expect religion to deal with issues of oppression and discrimination. I will look at what religion says about crises in self-hood, but not primarily through theories from crises of religion, instead I will try to find out how some men and woman who have converted from Christianity to Islam within the African-American culture, express their understanding of how and why they choose to convert to Is-

⁴⁶ Ibid.,15.

⁴⁷ Dr. Morton Klass: Prof. in Anthropology, Colombia University, USA.

⁴⁸ Morten Klass. *Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford, UK: Westview Press,1995),13.

⁴⁹ “Sosiologisk tidsskrift 2 (1994), 139-153@1994 Scandinavian University Press.

⁵⁰ Klass. *Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion*, 15.

lam. Klass has emphasized that religion serves to satisfy our need for explanation, saying that “the institution of religion provides meaning and purpose and satisfaction and order to an otherwise chaotic universe.”⁵¹ His statement offers an outside perspective of religion versus the subjective inner perspective. However, in my thesis I aim to use a phenomenological approach where my interviewees` subjective experiences are the center of attention. A phenomenological approach aims to analyze a phenomenon in the way it is experienced and seen by the individual in an actual given situation. With the help of open and qualitative interview approach as the major method for my empirical data, it might be possible to find out how the men and woman explain their conversion process towards Islam. As African-Americans have been victims of oppression and racism through the history and are viewed as a minority group within the majority Caucasian society of the U.S. I also see the importance of analyzing the context. Until recently, psychologists have tended to ignore or discount cultural and social variables. Yet we cannot talk adequately about a person`s psyche without contextualizing that psyche.⁵² Context not only provides the socio cultural matrix that shapes a person`s myth, rituals, symbols, and beliefs; it also has a powerful impact in terms of access, mobility, and the opportunity for coming into contact with new religious influences.

This statement confirms the importance of the fact that my view and respect of “religion” has influenced this study. As I am familiar with the existence of congregations, churches/mosques, ministers/ imams, Muslim sects and Christian denominations, and so on, it might contribute to trust and mutual understanding of these elements. However, and although it might be a limited opportunity, the open ended qualitative interviewees hopefully give the interviewees the opportunity to reflect upon their view of religion.

2.1.2 A qualitative interview approach on Muslim conversions

Muslim Conversion processes cannot be understood without looking at the social and cultural issues. An open ended qualitative approach, as I understand it, can be a helpful tool when trying to grasp the social factors of individuals. The qualitative interviews were conducted in order to emphasize the placement of individual within an ongoing and developing social

⁵¹ Ibid., 16.

⁵² Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversions*, 30.

structure.⁵³ Involving a minority group who has converted from Christianity to Islam, I must be aware and create space for their role and contribution. This cannot be done fruitfully without listening to their voices expressing their experienced stories. Many scholars in the field of social science would say that African-American Muslims are marginalized in a double way; they have achieved a minority status, because they are Muslims living in a dominant Christian society, and have a background as being classified as “black people” in a “white dominated society.” Do the converts in Indianapolis identify with this standpoint? These assumptions confirm for me the importance of an open ended qualitative approach, where the converts are not just becoming a result of statistics “out there” to be studied and controlled, but rather a phenomenon to be explored and understood.⁵⁴ “The art of interviewing entails framing questions in a way that allows interviewees to maintain their dignity while they tell a story that is important to them; this means allowing subjects their humanity.”⁵⁵

2.1.3 Life Stories: The process from oral to written form

In Billy Ehn’s⁵⁶ article: “life as an interview-construction,” he differentiates self-biographic material in two main categories. He points out that there exists a significant difference between “life-historical interviews” and other forms of questioning where people serve as “participant,” “informant” or “representatives.” The life-historical interview is unique because the individual becomes placed in the world’s center.⁵⁷

Despite of Ehn’s distinction between a life historical interview and other forms of qualitative interviews, I experience that his description of a life historical interview could also be applied to some of my unstructured interviews. Through unstructured qualitative interviews my interviewees were asked about their conversion story, where in many cases my interviewees were speaking of their life as a life construction, which can be understood as story starting from the childhood into adulthood, before and beyond. The informants had the opportunity to (re)construct his/her life. Experiences as a child, youth and adult become processed and turns

⁵³ Soskolne T. Stein J and Gibson K. “Working with ambivalence: Finding positive identity for HIV/AIDS in South Africa.” *Centre for Social Science Research Working Paper*. No. 52, (University of Cape Town: 2003),4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*,4.

⁵⁵ James A. Holstein and Jaber F.Gubrium. *Postmodern Interviewing* (Oaks, California: Sage Publication, 2003), 146.

⁵⁶ Billy Ehn: f. 1946; phil.dr ethology, professor at the Ethnological institution at Umeå University.

⁵⁷ Billy Ehn in Tigerstedt Roos and Anni Vilkkö. *Livet som intervjukonstruktion*.ed. *Sjølvsbiografi, kultur, liv. Levnadshistoriska studier inom humna-och samhällsvetenskap*. (Stockholm/Skåne: Brutus Østlings Bokförlag Symposion 1992), 206.

into a relatively continuously life-history which also involves information about the relationship between the individual and his/her situated context. This can function as a therapeutic tool where life requires new meaning. In many of my interviews I experienced that the interview situation turned out to be a processing session, which offered new realizations and insight to their life as a whole; through sharing intimate truths both from childhood, marriage, or other relations which they told me they never had shared with anyone before, certain aspects of life got a new meaning. The story which is being constructed is controlled and shaped by several different factors: the re-searcher`s knowledge goal and questions, the informants will to share their experiences, and his or her interest in presenting themselves in a certain way and explain or justify their actions. ⁵⁸

There exist significant differences between men`s and women`s ways of sharing about their lives, and even differences between generations and classes in society. It is not just the context of experience which is different, but the storytelling- style, conventions for how we present ourselves and ideas of what a life is and it`s meaning; therefore empirical data should be able to give knowledge of how people organize their live history with central expressions which many times is taken for granted. ⁵⁹

In addition to the mentioned factors, the story will obviously be influenced by the relationship that is established during the interviewing process. Steinar Kvale points out:

In a research setting it is up to the interviewer to create in a short time a contact that allows the interaction to get beyond merely a polite conversation or exchange of ideas. The interviewer must establish an atmosphere in which the subject feels safe enough to talk freely about his or her experiences and feelings. ⁶⁰

A life story can be understood as one`s experience of life, highlighting the most important aspects. ⁶¹ The story is chronological and organized around the central, outspoken questions, ⁶² which in my case dealt with reasons for their conversion.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 207.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Steinar Kvale. *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. (Lund, Sweden: Sage Publications, 1996), 125.

⁶¹ Robert Atkinson. *The Life Story Interview* (California/London: Sage Publications, 1998), 8.

⁶² Ehn in Roos and Vilkkö. *Sjølvybiografi, kultur, liv: Levnadshistoriske studier inom humna-och samhällvetenskap*, 206.

In the qualitative unstructured interviews, “A life-story construction has the ability to offer and create a certain order in life consistency, with the help of what we call “control-lines”, where separate experiences get organized in a way where every new situation can be described as a part of the life⁶³” process.”⁶⁴ ⁶⁵The Swedish Ethnologist Stefan Bohman compares different biographical material such as auto biographies, memory descriptions, journals and life-story interviews. Bohman aims to show that there are significant differences between an oral and written presentation of a life-story interview.⁶⁶ The oral interview gives a direct, spontaneous and emotional presentation. The autobiographies are edited and controlled and this also reflects an idealized picture of the writer.⁶⁷ However, as Bohman points out “almost invariably, the “oral” sources come to us in a written form, as transcript of interviews, as records of participants` observations, as recollections put down on paper.”⁶⁸

2.1.4 The importance of “the Other” in qualitative interviewing

The American anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano explains the difference between life story and autobiography by including “the Other”:

The life history, like the autobiography, presents the subject from his own perspective. It differs from autobiography in that it is an immediate response to a demand posed by an “Other” and carries within it the expectation of that “Other”. It is, as it were, doubly edited: during the encounter itself and during the literary (re-) encounter.⁶⁹

Even though this focus on life stories, I also find it as important analytical factors in my way of doing qualitative interviews. I find that “the Other” is a significant element in the study of qualitative interviews, especially in the way I approached my interviewees. Although I had met some of my interviewees before the interview process, the majority of the connections, I made the first hand contact by telephone. In most of the cases I had been introduced to my interviewees through good friends or Imam Michael Saheer. I imagine that this introduction, or having mutual friends, impacted the interviews positively, and made me more than a total

⁶³ Ibid., 208.

⁶⁴ A definition, which also can be applied in qualitative interviews.

⁶⁵ Nilson (1986) in En in Roos och Vilkkö.(red). *Sjølviografi, kultur og liv*, 206.

⁶⁶ A analyze, which also can be applied in qualitative interviews.

⁶⁷ Stephan Bohman (1986) in Ehn in Roos och Vilkkö.(red). *Sjølviografi, kultur og liv*, 206.

⁶⁸ Ehn (Bohman 1988) in Roos och Vilkkö.(red). *Sjølviografi, kultur og liv*, 199.

⁶⁹ Vicent Crapanzano in Gerald Handel. *Making a Life in Yorkville. Experience and Meaning in the Life-Course Narrative of an Urban Working Class Man*. (Greenwood, USA: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc. 2000), 19.

stranger, but not a close friend. The stories told were directed towards me and must be seen in this light. For many years I have worked in the U.S's ghettos as a social worker and through personal relationships with African-Americans and its community, my interest for "their story," identity, and religious search have grown deeper, and my curiosity linked to the growth in Muslim conversions among African-Americans, have made me impatient in getting first-hand insight and better understanding. However the relationship also included me being a white European woman versus the informant being African-American man or women in the U.S. There are several factors that probably will impact my interview situation and research results, for example gender related issues related to men involving a man's particular prescription for self-presentation, or issues related to ethnicity and color; in the contemporary context of America and Western European society, being "white" is often the un-reflected upon standard from which all other ethnic identities vary. But the meaning and consequence of that variation itself, often goes unnoticed. Frequently, person of color simply apply technical skills and be straightforwardly "objective," as if respondents were people whose subjectivity could be taken for granted.⁷⁰

2.1. 5 A qualitative approach in cross cultural and ethnic interviewing

A central proposition that emerges is that interviewing across ethnicities may require extensive ethnographic fieldwork, both before and during the interview process.⁷¹ The focus on cross-cultural issues due to making interviews between the white researcher and black interviewees, have been many. I would consider myself as a participating observer in African-American society through having lived and worked in that particular context. Participating observation in an informant's face-to-face network gives another and complementary access to the participants world view than what the informant shares written or in an oral interview, an access which maybe is less controlled by the informant's need for rational reasons. It can therefore create a contrast towards intellectuals' tendency to create meaning through sharing a picture of structure and continuity.⁷² I further believe that my cultural participation in the African-American scene, especially earlier work with the court system and in the "art- scene"

⁷⁰ Javer F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein. *Qualitative Research Practice*. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc.2001), 280.

⁷¹ Gubrium and Holstein. *Qualitative Research Practice*. 133.

⁷² Line Alice Ytrehus. *Intellektuelle i Eksil. Integrering og ekskludering i livsverdenperspektiv* (Bergen: Det historisk-filosofiske fakultet, Universitetet i Bergen, 2004), 27.

of Indianapolis impacted the dialogue to the extent of creating a safe foundation, a sense of unity beyond color and culture with a focus on common interests and understanding of family system. I personally believe that my white skin-tone has not been used against me. As a white Norwegian I do not carry the American colonial history which also became a central focus of the dialogue among us. Being a Norwegian white female having lived in Indianapolis working with African-Americans, I am familiar with African-American expressions, terms, rhetoric and body language, although, there will always be limitations though years of experience will never make me become a Black American.

2.1.6 Additional sources through Internet and Statistics

I have also used the Internet as an important information tool, both as a medium and as a source. I have searched for relevant background information, but also compared various sources to check out the creditability; in that way I have tried to select the most reliable sources. For instance, I have tried to avoid searching for statistic from Muslim organizations' Web pages, since I have observed the statistics often showed a large contrast compared to other statistics through indicating a higher number of Muslims. After having searched and investigated for relevant statistics, facts, and relevant literature, additional sources included in my theses are: Statistics from the highly acknowledged Pew Research Center and American Census Bureau. Other sources are articles which I have bought from High Beam Research, where access to academic articles published in magazines and news papers are accessible. Other external Internet sources which I have been using are articles from the Christian Research Institute, Jamestown Foundation, Blackology Research and Development Institute. Examples on media channels used in the thesis are: www.CNN.com, [www.Religious Tolerance.com](http://www.ReligiousTolerance.com) and Washington Post and Indianapolis Star.

2.1.7 The Procedure of collecting data and bringing it forward

The people telling their stories in this study are all U.S born African-American men and women who have converted from different Christian denominations to Islam in the U.S. They are all Sunni Orthodox Muslim. Whereas 4 of my interviewees converted directly to Sunni

Orthodox Islam, while the remaining 8 came converted from the Nation of Islam.⁷³ Out of Indianapolis's six Mosques, three are represented among my interviewees. 7 of my interviewees attend the Nur Allah Islamic Center⁷⁴ which promotes moderate Sunni Orthodox Islam under the tradition of W. D Muhammad and has its` out spring from the NOI.⁷⁵ 3 of my interviewees attend the Al-Huda Mosque⁷⁶ at the North side which has a mixture of members from several cultural backgrounds. The two remaining attend the Majid Al Fajr Mosque.⁷⁷

They are all in an age frame between 38-60 years old. 2/3 of the informants are men while 1/3 of the informants in the interview are women. As I started off the interview-process, I had a certain group in mind; male converts, mainly based on the availability of informants within my network. As I progressed, I talked with an Imam who advised me to take women into consideration. He meant that African-American female converts would give me broader perspectives and diversity of conversions-stories which would impact the results, and further on, he could actually introduce me for female informants from his mosque.

With 2 of my informants, my friend, Kenny Howard, came alongside, and introduced me to them. In another case a former colleague and friend of mine, Joshua Kupke, took me to meet one of his Muslim colleagues, and it further developed into an invitation to interview her husband as well. Informant number 5, I got through a friend of mine working at a health club who introduced me to one of her Muslim costumers. Informant number 6, was given to me

⁷³ Muhammad Mosques # 74. I am mentioning this mosque since this is the mosque that represents the Nation of Islam which has been the gateway/entrance to Islam for the majority of my interviewees. The mosque is the local outpost for Lois Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, which some traditional Muslims consider to be apart from orthodox Islam.⁷³

⁷⁴ The Nur-Allah Islamic Center, is a mosque which is rooted in the Nation of Islam, and its members embrace a more moderate universal form for traditional Islam(Sunni Orthodox Islam) promoted by Warith Deen Mohammad, whose father founded the Nation of Islam which led it until his death in 1975. It's membership is comprised primarily of native-born black Americans.

⁷⁵ The tradition/community of Imam W. Deen Muhammad is also called "The American Society of Muslim." It was originally a branch out of NOI, determined to bring it into conformity with Sunni Islam In 1978 Louis Farrakhan resigned from W. Deen's reformed organization, with a aim to rebuild the original NOI.

⁷⁶ Al-Huda was founded in 2002 on the North Side of Indianapolis, by the Al-Huda Foundation, a non-profit, religious, educational and cultural organization. The members consist of Arabs, Indians, Pakistanis, Africans, Turks and Indonesians.

⁷⁷ Masjid Al Fajr was founded in 1971, and has traditionally been the largest and most diverse mosque in the city, with black-born converts, whites and immigrants from around the world.⁷⁷

through an interesting conversation at a local salsa-club, which developed to another interview at a coffee-shop the next day. This conversation inspired me to contact Imam Michael Saaher, whom I called up to ask for information. Including being willing to step in as an interviewee himself, he also called up potential members from his mosque, who was willing to equip me with interviewees enough to make for the completion of my research.

I have given the interviewees the choice of location for the interviews. Some of my interviewees chose to meet me in their homes, others preferred the barbershop, familiar restaurants chosen on their terms, at work at the fire station, and several meetings took place at different franchised coffee-shops within the district of Indiana. I found it important to meet in a familiar and convenient setting in order for my interviewees to feel as comfortable as possible on familiar ground.

The fieldwork was conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S during two separated visits, in October 2007, and March/April 2008. The research is licensed by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), and I have tried to follow the national legal and ethical requirements regulating research. The names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement, and therefore fictional names are used.

In advance before the interviews started, I routinely began by getting out my tape-recorder, re-asking their permission to record and re-explaining issues of confidentiality and anonymity. I also retold the story behind and the aims for my research project, including a brief introduction of myself, before turning on the tape-recorder and asking my participants to continue with “their personal story including their conversion story.” Being aware that the tape-recorder is another part of the context in the same category as physical space, introduction, and gender,⁷⁸ I was fully prepared for it could increase nervousness or dissuade frankness⁷⁹ or could inhibit interaction based on fear that the researcher may misuse the recorded information.⁸⁰ However, the tape-recorder did not influence the interviewees in any observable negative way. I experienced just once during an interview in a restaurant that one of my interview-

⁷⁸ Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F.Gubrium, David Silverman. *Qualitative Research Practice*. (London: Sage Publications, 2007),18.

⁷⁹ Hilary Arksey and Peter Knight *Interviewing for Social Scientists: An Introductory Resource with examples*. (London: Sage, 1999), 105.

⁸⁰ Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, Silvermann. *Qualitative Research Practice*, 19.

wees asked me to turn the recorder off, in order to share some intimate details of his life which he felt was outside the context of the interview subject. Most of the informants could go on for 1-3 hours, but instead of a monologue it became a conversational dialogue. Since many of my interviewees questioned themes which I had planned to include in the session, it got covered in the following mutual dialogue.

All of my informants speak American English and I met them all at least once. During my time in Indianapolis I also had several phone-conversations with my informants either before or after the interviews in order to confirm information they had given me, or in order to obtain new knowledge about relevant issues. Their generosity and willingness to accommodate created a friendly atmosphere. Suspicious attitudes towards my role as a researcher were limited, with exceptions from one moment of anxiety when one of my informant turned suspicious, asking me if I was a representative from CIA. After many hours of building up trust to the point of sharing intimate details of family upbringing, racial and religious personal issue, the spirit of the moment just caught him- like possibly many of black males might sometimes feel, when suddenly comfortable with a white stranger. The whole absurd scene could not have been more outside my imagination- and luckily the suspicious moment ended up with laughter.

3.0 THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONTEXT

The Muslim conversions cannot be understood without looking at African-American history. The focus on a group of interviewees is not carefully delineated if not related to the social, political and religious history of my interviewees. In this chapter I will give a brief presentation of African-American history, before giving some background to the establishment of Black Islam in the U.S, particularly the Nation of Islam and Sunni Orthodox Islam. Towards the end, I will turn to the contemporary situation and my empirical material.

3.1 The African-American History

The American historian Roger Daniels stresses the fact that there are little primarily documentation of the first generation of African-Americans in the U.S. Actually do we not even know the names of the Africans who came to the U.S, except the names given to them by their masters.⁸¹ The African slave trade existed for over four centuries, from the mid fifteenth century to about 1870. During this time about 10 million people were kidnapped out of Africa, and 350,000 of them were put out for sale in America.⁸² The total loss of lives due to harsh treatment on the ships, were estimated to be between 1, 25 to 3, 15 million lives.⁸³ The slave trade saw huge profits, and it was an integral part of western European imperialism and economical growth. Daniels underlines that “much of the profits accumulated in the slave trade eventually flowed into other branches of capitalist enterprise, particularly in England, France and the northeastern United States, and accelerated the industrialization of those places.”⁸⁴ Africans were brought from a variety of locations such as Angola, Benin and the Gold Coast etc. to North America.⁸⁵

3.2 Race and ethnicity among Muslims in the U.S

It is said that from the very beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, conversion of the slaves to Christianity was viewed by the emerging nations of Western Christendom as a justification

⁸¹ Daniels, Roger. *Coming to America: A history of immigration and ethnicity in American life*, 57.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 57.

Ibid., 61

⁸² Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 205.

⁸² Daniels. *Coming to America: A history of immigration and ethnicity in American life*, 61.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁴ Daniels. *Coming to America: A history of immigration and ethnicity in American life*, 53.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

for enslavement of Africans. When Portuguese caravels returned from the coast of West Africa with kidnapped Africans in the fifteenth century, Gomes Eannes De Azurara, a chronicler, observed that the greater benefit belonged not to the Portuguese adventurers but to the captive Africans, “for though their bodies were now brought into some subjection, that was a small matter in comparison of their souls, which would now possess true freedom for evermore.”⁸⁶ The colonial power often proclaimed missionary zeal as an important motive for colonizing the New World. The duty of Christianizing slaves as well as Indians was urged upon the Council for Foreign Plantations by Charles II in 1660. Instructions were sent out from the Crown to colonial governors, such as Culpeper of Virginia in 1682 and Dongan of New York in 1686, to do all within their power to “facilitate and encourage the Conversion of Negroes and Indians to Christianity.”⁸⁷

Despite the justification of slavery as a means of spreading the gospel, and despite proclamations of the duty of Christian colonists to evangelize the heathen, the process of slave conversion was blocked by major obstacles, not the least of which was the hostility of the colonists themselves. The economic profitability of slaves, not their Christianization, held top priority for the colonial planter. Morgan Godwin, an English preacher who spent several years in Virginia, comments in a sermon published in 1685 “that one of the principal reasons for the refusal of English planters to allow their slaves to receive instructions was the fear that baptism would emancipate their slaves. The notion that if slaves were baptized, they should, according to the laws of the British nation, and the canons of its church be freed, was legally vague but widely believed.”⁸⁸

It is said that missionaries complained that slaveholders refused them permission to catechize their slaves because baptism made it necessary to free them. Masters objected to slave conversion because they believed that Africans were too “brutish” to be instructed. Part of this objection was based on the linguistic and cultural barriers between African-born slaves and English colonials. Towards the end of the seventeenth century Col. Francis Nicholson, governor of Virginia, was instructed by London to recommend to the Indians and Negroes in the Christian faith. The Virginia house of Burgesses replied in 1699 to Nicholson that:

⁸⁶ Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, 96.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

The negroes born in this country are generally baptized and brought up in the Christian religion; but for negroes imported hither, the gross bestiality and rudeness of their manners, the variety and strangeness of their languages, and the weakness and shallowness of their minds, render it in a manner impossible to make any progress in their conversion.⁸⁹

Other arguments used to legitimize the slavery were the very old Western argument, found in Plato`s Republic: “The wise should rule over the unwise.”⁹⁰

During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Stephen Douglas defended the right of states to decide for themselves, whether they wanted slavery in precisely these terms:

The civilized world has always held that when any race of men have shown themselves to be so degraded by ignorance, superstition, cruelty, and barbarism, as to be utterly incapable of governing themselves, they must, in the nature of things, be governed by others, by such laws as are deemed to be applicable to their condition.⁹¹

Other theories and beliefs that confirms this, is the statement of the American anthropologist, Melville Jean Herskovits⁹² who believed that the American Negro had no past except a history of primitive savagery in African from which he had been delivered by contacts with European civilization in America. For Herskovits it had important practical ramifications in the struggle against racism. To deny that the black American had a culture and history of significance and sophistication in Africa and to suggest that African culture was not advanced enough to endure contact with superior European culture was to imply that Negroes were an inferior people.⁹³ Reflecting on slavery early in the twentieth century the African-American scholar W.E.B DU Bois acknowledged that slaves shared the hardships of many common laborers in the mines and sweat-shops of the world:

But there is a real meaning to slavery different from that we may apply to the laborer today. It was in part psychological, the enforced personal feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master, the standing with hat in the hand. It was the helplessness. It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual.⁹⁴

This was also the conditions for African -American in this time era, as the great depression.

⁸⁹ Roboteus. *Slave Religion: The invisible institution in the Antebellum South*, 100.

⁹⁰ Leo Strauss. *What is political philosophy? And other studies* (Chicago/London: Originally published in 1959. The University of Chicago Press Edition 1988), 315.

⁹¹ D`Souza Dinesh. *The end of racism*, 103.

⁹² b.1896-d.1963

⁹³ Roboteus. *Slave Religion. The “invisible institution” in the Antebellum South*, 48.

⁹⁴ Henry Louis Gate, Jr. 1990 in D`Souza Dinesh. *The end of racism*. (1995), 92.

3.3 A short history of Black Islam

Islam was among the African religions the African slaves brought with them to North America. Islam had its significant impact on West Africa from the 15th to the 19th centuries, the years of the transatlantic slave trade. According to social anthropologist Robert Dannin, it is estimated that fifteen to twenty percent of these Africans considered Muslims, and nearly 50% of them came from communities influenced by Islam.⁹⁵ Among the Africans who became slaves in the America were tribes such as the Wolof, Serer, Mandinke, Bambara, Fulani, and Hausa, who were Muslim or at least had been influenced by Islam. The old kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay had been centers of Muslim influence in the western Sudan. Many of these enslaved people were considered Sunni Muslims and many of them highly literate in Arabic. The British explorer, Mungo Park, estimated that one seventh of Africans shipped to the West Indies for “slave breaking” for North America read and wrote Arabic.⁹⁶ This means that Islam was present in those areas that became the United States of America from the very beginning of British settlement.

The African-American Muslim community in 2009 is very diverse, and includes black American members of immigrant-led mosque, African-American devotees of Salafi and Wahhabi versions of Islam, African-American Shi'is, African-American Sufis, Five Percenters, Sunni followers of Wallace D. Muhammad, members of the Moorish Science Temple, members of local Muslim Student Associations, and followers of Minister Lois Farrakhan, who reconstituted a version of the Nation of Islam in 1978. Many black Muslims are not associated with any organized group.⁹⁷

3.4 The establishment of black nationalistic movements and sects in the U.S

There are numerous of unaffiliated religious groups in African-American communities. They could also be seen as sectarian because of their internal structure and their oppositional

⁹⁵ Walker Dennis. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 123.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹⁷ Curtis IV, Edward E. 2006:184/i: These are the figures generally cited in press accounts and scholarly introduction to Islam in the United States. For various introductory treatments of American Islam and Muslims in the United States, see Karen Isakson Leonard, *Muslim in the United States: the State of Research* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds. *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

stance towards the dominant society and its religious organizations. African Christian religious traditions were, interestingly, utilized by non Christian African-American leaders. Black Nationalism was defined by the loss of hope in America, claiming that black people primarily are Africans and not Americans. However, in the beginning of the 1900, there were three major movements which I have considered of special significance due to defining the kind of nationalism which has impacted my interviewees' life.⁹⁸ The following movements are Marcus Garvey's UNIA which is considered as the largest and most successful mass movements of blacks in the U.S.⁹⁹ The Moorish Science Temple was heavily influenced by UNIA, and functioned as a forerunner for the NOI.¹⁰⁰ The NOI further played an important role for establishing a Black Muslims community in the U.S.

3.5 Black Nationalism through Garveyism

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) grew up in St. Ann's Bay in Jamaica.¹⁰¹ Marcus Garvey is viewed as the key precedent to the formation of Islamic movements among blacks, including the Moorish Science Temple and the NOI, and studied and worked in London during the early 1910s. In 1917, New York, he established the Universal Negro Improvement Association called UNIA.¹⁰² According to Dannin, "UNIA reflected a plurality of religious viewpoints, including Judaism, Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy, but associated mainly with Islam."¹⁰³ Despite of a Muslim association, Cone underlines that Garvey did not focus much on religion, but first and foremost he used political approach. The aim for his organization was to promote nationhood among Black Americans. His passionate drive was rooted in him knowing that "without racial pride, no people could make leaders and build a nation that would command the respect of the world."¹⁰⁴ According to the American historian Edward E. Curtis, ritual and theology were important aspect of Garveyism, although they were not central to Garvey's mission. Garvey espoused beliefs in the "God of Ethiopia," divine retribution against whites, and black chosenness. If blacks desired salvation, Garvey argues, they should be self-reliant

⁹⁸ Ibid.,14.

⁹⁹ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America. A Dream or a Nightmare*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 225.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.,225.

¹⁰² Edward E. Curtis IV. *Islam in Black America: identity, liberation and difference in African-American Islamic thought* (State University of New York: State University of New York University Press, Albany, 2002), 49.

¹⁰³ Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A dream or a nightmare*,12,

and build up earthly power. A central principle of the movement involved emigration to Africa, and to bind the United States and Africa more closely together.¹⁰⁵

3.6 The Moorish Science Temple of America

The Moorish Temple of Islam¹⁰⁶ was founded by Timothy Drew Ali in Newark, New Jersey (1913). According to Walker, it was established “as a response to the exclusion that happened when the African Americans left the South moving to the North. When arriving the North they had hoped to find white fellow-Americans of a more open disposition than some of their recent neighbors,¹⁰⁷ as the South “continued to undergo significant changes as whites assumed greater control over political systems and regained the superior positions they had lost during reconstruction. Rigid Jim Crow segregation patterns and disfranchisement were legislated, white intimidation, including lynching`s, increased.”¹⁰⁸ However, the black migration also consisted of stress and hardship due to deprivation and the trauma-inducing racism that met them in the big cities in the U.S North. As a response to this, the Moorish Temple of Islam was a mechanism crafted of rural blacks from the South to build a new community in the face of the obstacles they were facing. By imposing different types of economies and self discipline, the sect gave its male and female converts both the motivation and help to reconstruct African-American families, which in that period face disintegration in the unwelcoming Northern urban environment.¹⁰⁹ The low income and irregular employment of many African-American males who had migrated to the North made unwilling heroines of black woman who had to serve for the whites for minimal salary. This somehow forced their children into the stereotypical latch-key children.¹¹⁰

To transform that disintegration, the Moorish temples, encouraged by the Quran and account of Arab Islam in the U.S press, strove to help them to construct patriarchal families similar to

¹⁰⁵ Charles M. Christian. *Black Saga. The African American Experience. A Chronology*. Boston/New York: Hoaghten Mifflin, 1999), 309.

¹⁰⁶ Also called the “national movement”

¹⁰⁷ Walker. *The Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam*, 215.

¹⁰⁸ Christian. *Black Saga, the African American Experience. A Chronology*, 318-319.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹¹⁰ The term refers to the latchkey of a door to a house. The key is often strung around the children`s neck or left hidden under a mat at the read door of the property. The terms is claimed to have originated from an NBC documentary in 1944, due to the phenomenon of children being left home alone becoming common during and after World War 11, when one parent would be enlisted into the armed forces so the other would get a job.
[Http:// Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org)

middle-class, White-Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) texture. The leaders urged the males to assume the main economic role in the family and wives to obey their husbands, and they discouraged divorce. According to Dannin, the movements' belief compared "'The Prophet' Noble Drew Ali to Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha," which he claimed to represent.¹¹¹

As an alternative to the Americanism that existed, Drew Ali identified African-Americans as "fallen sons and daughters of the Asiatic Nation of North America." This mythology linked African-Americans' bloodline to the Moabites and Canaanites from Morocco and Egypt. This resulted in classifying African-Americans as Asiatics. According to Dannin, "the Moorish Temple associated itself with Islam, but admitted the prophets of other world religions."¹¹²

3.7 The Nation of Islam under Wali Fard Muhammad

Nation of Islam (NOI) sect got established in the mid-1930s among unemployed poor African-Americans suffering from the Great Depression in Paradise Valley, Detroit, Michigan, U.S. The establisher, Wali Fard Muhammad, and the organizations preachers denounced whites as "essentially evil devil bred by genetic grafting who might shortly be collectively incinerated by God for their acts of oppression against black humanity." Wali Fard Muhammad was a convicted drug dealer, and called himself the "prophet." He claimed to have come from Mecca to America to find the Lost Tribe of Shabazz, consisting of black Muslims who wrongly thought of themselves as Negroes.¹¹³ He told his black customers and associates that their true religion was Islam, and that their original language was Arabic, stolen from them when they came over in slave ships from the Old World. Fard Muhammad had an impact on the entire country,¹¹⁴ and set up the first Nation of Islam temple in Detroit. For a fee, he agreed to change the "slave names" of American Blacks to their ancestral names; temporarily each person was asked to use "X" to symbolize his or her true and unknown family name.

¹¹⁵According to the traditions of the NOI, Elijah Poole (1897-1975), son of a Baptist minister from Georgia, became Fard's chief assistant and eventually recognized Fard as God in the

¹¹¹ Robert Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

¹¹² Ibid., 28.

¹¹³ Dinesh D' Souza. *The end of racism: principles for a multiracial society* (New York, New York: The free press, 1995), 427.

¹¹⁴ Curtis IV Edvard E. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*, 3.

¹¹⁵ D' Souza. *The end of racism*, 427.

flesh.¹¹⁶ Fard convinced him to drop his slave-name and take up the name Muhammad. Fard and Elijah Muhammad set up the Nation of Islam's second temple and current headquarters in Chicago.¹¹⁷

3.7.1 The Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad.

Elijah Muhammad was born in Georgia, but left for Detroit in 1923, after several years of brutal experiences with racism in Atlanta.¹¹⁸ According to Cone did he leave the Christian ministry because he found it to be an ineffective tool for fighting racism. When he became a disciple of Wallace D. Fard, they founded the first Temple of Islam on July 4th, 1930.¹¹⁹ Fard disappeared mysteriously in 1934, and Elijah Muhammad became the leader of the movement, and removed the headquarters from Detroit to Chicago. Muhammad defined the NOI as "anti-white and anti-Christian."¹²⁰ In 1942 he was convicted on the charge of "encouraging draft resistance," and served three years in prison (the Federal Correctional Institution at Milan, Michigan).¹²¹

Elijah Muhammad's very special development of Islam, however, carried serious variation from mainstream black orthodox Islam. He made tactical changes of the Sunni Orthodox Islam. However, some of the Islamic precepts he did keep. The Ramadan fast, for instance, conveniently became a December fast, corresponding to the Christians' festive season in the U.S, although this timing may also have been designed to break the grip of "pagan" Christians on the adherents. The NOI under Elijah did creditable work in restoring pride and self-respect to poverty-stricken, ill-educated blacks.¹²² ¹²³His NOI was purposely designed to address the spiritual, social, economic, and political needs of the black underclass, with a special focus on those in prison and urban ghettos.¹²⁴ It started as a small group of people at two temples in Chicago and Detroit but spread across the United States and even to Jamaica and Bermuda. Malcolm X, became Elijah Muhammad's chief missionary and a national symbol of black

¹¹⁶ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm*, 49.

¹¹⁷ D' Souza. *The end of racism*, 427.

¹¹⁸ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm*, 49.

¹¹⁹ Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 263.

¹²⁰ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm*, 49.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Walker. *Islam and the Search for African American Nationhood*, 47.

¹²³ Curtis IV Edvard E.2006:4/i: "Muslim Daily Prayers (Chicago: University if Islam, 1957)

¹²⁴ James H. Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America* (Maryknoll. New York: Orbis Books, 2006),155.

resistance and black anger. He emphasized the need for self-determination and openly advocated separation from whites.

3.7.2 The NOI's powerful evangelist: Malcolm X

Malcolm (1925-1965) was born in Omaha, Nebraska. His father was a Georgia Baptist preacher, who was actively involved in black people's struggle for dignity and justice.¹²⁵ Malcolm's formal education ended at eight grade, but continued informally in the ghettos of Boston and New York where he was a hustler. Malcolm was taken to prison in 1948 where he continued to challenge the whites in authority, especially the "prison psychologist" and the "prison chaplain."¹²⁶ His prison inmates named him "Satan" because of his hostile attitude towards religion. The process of his radical conversion started when his brother wrote him a letter which said: "Malcolm: don't eat any pork, and don't smoke any more cigarettes. I will show you how to get out of prison." He started reading about the "true" black religion in the prison, and what his brother told him about the teachings of Elijah Muhammad "the Messenger of Allah, "reinforced what he had read in the prisons history books.¹²⁷ Malcolm discovered the respect for himself as a human being that had therefore escaped him.¹²⁸ James H. Cone describes Malcolm's conversion as "striking and instantaneous."¹²⁹ "When his brother Reginald first told him of Muhammad's teachings about the devil white man and the brain-washed black man, he was left rocking with some of the first serious thoughts of life." Malcolm frames the experience of Muhammad's teachings as "blinding light."¹³⁰ "Every instinct of the ghetto jungle streets, every hustling fox and criminal wolf instinct in me...was struck numb."¹³¹ After his conversion, Malcolm was convinced that a new self and people hood was needed for African-Americans and doubted Christianity's capacity to restore this self.¹³²

Malcolm later became the trail blazer for the Universalist Sunni Orthodox Islam within the U.S, something I will come back to.

¹²⁵ Ibid.,41.

¹²⁶ Ibid.,47-49.

¹²⁷ Ibid.,49.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹³¹ Ibid., 50.

¹³² Ibid.,51.

Today, the leader of the NOI is named Lois Farrakhan. He has continued Elijah Muhammad's traditions of urging blacks in America to be aware of the evil nature of whites, recognizing their true bloodline, reclaim their racial heritage, and work with singular purpose to expel the white impostor from his unearned position as master of the universe.¹³³ The NOI recruits actively in the inner cities of North America. It has established beachheads on several campuses, especially historically black ones. According to D'Souza, the NOI is probably the most powerful black movement in the prisons.¹³⁴

3.8 Sunni Orthodox Islam in the United States.

The history of its establishment through the Nation of Islam in the U.S

The reason why Malcolm left the Nation of Islam, was that he officially rebelled by disobeying Elijah Muhammad's directive that no Muslim minister comment on the murder of President Kennedy. This scene found place on December 1st, 1963¹³⁵, and on December 4th, Muhammad suspended Malcolm from his duties as national spokesman and demanded his silence.¹³⁶ On March 8th, 1964, Malcolm announced that he was leaving the movement, and four days after he where announced that he would embrace cooperation with other black leaders interested in pursuing an activist strategy toward black liberation. On the other hand he was exploring Sunni Islam and interesting in making contact with immigrant Muslims.¹³⁷ On April 13th, 1964, Malcolm travelled to Mecca and made his first hajj. For the first time did he see what he framed as a real brotherhood between people of all races. After the pilgrimage, Malcolm said: "I am against every form of racism and segregation, every form of discrimination. I believe in human beings, and that all human beings should be respected as such, regardless of their color."¹³⁸ But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in American had led me to believe never could

¹³³ D` Souza. *The End of Racism*, 428.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹³⁵ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America. A dream or a nightmare*, 184.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹³⁷ Curtis IV. *Islam in Black America*, 90.

¹³⁸ DG, 13 May 1964, p.1; DG 15, May 1964, p.7; Malcolm X, interview on 18 January 1965 with Jack Barnes and Barry Sheppard of the Young Socialist Alliance, in Malcolm X, *By Any Means*, p.158. Hans J. Massaquoi, "Mystery of Malcolm X," *Ebony*, September 1964, pp 39, 42, 46; "Interview with Malcolm X and Harry Rings of WBAI," 28 January 1965, audiotape in Schomburg Center Oral History Collection; NYAN, 30 May 1964, pp.1, 32; EG, 25 August 1964. In Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 207.

exist between the white and the non-white.”¹³⁹ Despite of this experience which he defines as his “second conversion,” Malcolm defined Islam as a religion or a creed that could have limited impact in the achievement of his political goals. Even though the hajj had been a personally meaningful event in his life, it led him neither to question his essentialist view of race nor to develop a strategy for black liberation based on a universalistic interpretation of Islam. For Malcolm to become a real Sunni Orthodox Muslim, he was put under pressure from several Muslim state leaders to not appropriate Islam in an explicitly black struggle, mixing his Islam with pan-Africanism; but rather use Islam only in a universalistic way to support more general “human” liberation.¹⁴⁰ As a result, he chose pan-Africanism for his “politics” while grasping Islam as his “religion.” In this way, Malcolm became a trailblazer for the Black Sunni Orthodox Movements in the United States. Before any movement was officially settled, Malcolm was shot during a meeting in 1965.¹⁴¹

3.8.1 The African-American particular Sunni Orthodoxy under Wallace D. Muhammad

Wallace Muhammad was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1933, and was the son of the leader of the NOI, Elijah Muhammad. Despite of being the son of Elijah Muhammad, Wallace hardly knew his father as he was growing up, due to his father`s involvement with the Nation and his time away in prison. His mother become therefore his only parent and played a key role in sustaining the movement in her husband`s stead and inculcated NOI value and beliefs in her children as well.¹⁴² As a child, Wallace Muhammad attended the University of Islam`s elementary and secondary school, build by the NOI. He later received his formal education at this parochial institution, where he studied Arab. He was appointed as the leader of the NOI in 1958, and started to introduce his own Quran based teachings to local followers. From 1953 to 1961 he was incarcerated, and in the December 1961 edition of Muhammad speaks published a story whose headline announced that “Courts Jail Muslim Ministers; taught Negroes in Faith in Islam Religion.” He later described his time in prison as important to his own spiritual development, where he according to Curtis, studied both the Bible and the Quran more exten-

¹³⁹ Curtis. *Islam in Black America: identity, liberation and difference in African-American Islamic thought*, 90.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.,104.

¹⁴¹ Dennis Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, Inc, 2005), 341.

¹⁴² Curtis. *Islam in Black America: identity, liberation and difference in African-American Islamic thought*, 109.

sively than he had done before.¹⁴³ However, after Malcolm's suspension in December 1963, Wallace became aware of his father's guilt in adultery, and in May 1964, he broke with his father. A few months later after time in silence, he reaffirmed the legitimacy of his father's teaching. However, through the following years, from 1965 until 1971, he was expelled from the NOI's Islam several times, rooted in he and his father's disagreement in the debate about the Islamic legitimacy of the elder Muhammad's teaching and the need to introduce more Sunni Islamic concepts into the movement.¹⁴⁴ After the death of his father, the FBI's field office in Chicago identified Wallace Muhammad as "the only son of Elijah Muhammad who would have the necessary qualities to guide the NOI in such a manner as would eliminate racist teachings."¹⁴⁵ After his new position, he carried out a program of Sunni Islamic reform that, in a few months, almost completely changed the character of the NOI. In 1975 he announced that whites must be allowed to join the NOI. Through the years which followed he continued to bring the movement through a Sunni Orthodox reformation, where he started working close to Muslim immigrant associations. Through the whole reformation period he was struggling to define the organization's identity—an identity able to respond to both the particular and the universalistic needs due to stigmatization of being black. He did several attempts seeking to highlight the authentic "immigrant" identity of black; an example was when he on November 1th, 1975, announced that he would call himself "Bilalian", a term referring to Bilal ibn Rabbah, an African companion of the Prophet Muhammad and the first muadhadin, or prayer-caller, in Islam. Muhammad identified this ancestry as an exemplary model for African-American identity, based on Bilal being a Black Ethiopian slave who was an outstanding man in the history of Islam. He argued that African-American Muslims had a "double consciousness with Bilal because he was a Muslim and he was an African."¹⁴⁶ In 1978, after developing a closer relationship within the immigrant and foreign Muslim communities, Wallace received strong criticism for this ideology. He later removed the NOI and himself from the Bilalism, and according to Curtis he underlined it in an interview in 1993, that the NOI had just been experimenting, trying to find a solution on the identity problem. In Imam Muhammad's struggle to apply Islamic universalist modernism into his particular culture, he in the 1980s presented Islam as a tradition compatible with nations of personal freedom, individualism and democracy, through the Sunni Orthodox version.

¹⁴³ Curtis. *Islam in Black America: identity, liberation and difference in African-American Islamic thought*, 110.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

4.0 BLACK IDENTITY VERSUS A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Asking my interviewees why they left Christianity for Islam, I thought the respondents would indicate theological based reflections as the reason for conversion. This was probably based on my typically white protestant perception of religion as a dogmatic system that one ascribes to. However, my respondents had a different perspective on religion. To a larger degree they raised subjects as black identity, nationalism, gender, experienced racism and a feeling of second hand citizenship. That is also why the subject of black identity has been prioritized to such a high degree in my thesis.

In this chapter I aim to investigate to what extent black identity is rooted in a collective identity? I simply wish to question: how is Black Identity experienced? The reason why I highlight this subject is because I view it as a subject of high relevance, in order to understand Muslim conversions in the U.S. Through my interviewees` experience and reflections upon the search for identity as being an African-American minority, living in a white dominant society, I hope to be able to challenge and to show the complexities of the idea of the Black identity which often is presented as an absolute, fixed and settled term. The theoretical basis for my discussion will mainly focus on the oppressed experience, as a black minority and its effect on identity construction, as well as the importance of a differentiated subjectivity.

I will start with an empirical section, moving on to theory and back to the empirical part. In the first section I will introduce my interviewees` socio-cultural background, including some of my interviewees` personal experience of alienation as a child, which hopefully will function as a context to keep in mind, when I go on to the theories of importance for further discussion. In the theoretical section I aim to show the complexity of black identity through significant theories within the field, combined with personal reflections of the analyzes. This section includes essentialist and psychological theories on ethnicities as a collective group versus an individual identity. The following section continues with questioning black identity- a collective identity? Here I let my interviewees share their experience of belonging to the African-American culture with the focus on possibilities of integration versus assimilation in the predominately white American society. Subject such as “Black Identity through a stereotyped African-American culture” and “Black identity- the criminalized ‘other’ will be put under the loupe with a special emphasize on the field of Education, Crime and Classism. These are subjects I have considered of high relevance due to my interviewees` personal focus

and statements. My aim is that this choice of structure will function as a good “route” versus a standard “routine” on the journey to get a holistic understanding of the complexity of black identity.

4.1 Socio- cultural background

In this section I will introduce my informants educational background which I believe is important and valuable information due to its impact and reflection level on personal experiences. I will also present their Christian backgrounds. I will first introduce the male interviewees since $\frac{3}{4}$ of my interviewees are males, followed by the female-interviewees whom present $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total interviewees. Most of my informants have obtained a Bachelor degree and represent a wide diversity of backgrounds in terms of educational fields; Tee has obtained his Bachelor degree in Communication received while still being in penalty, but works at the moment as an owner of a Barbershop. Jamal is educated and works as a firefighter, while Kenny has obtained a Bachelor degree in religious studies, soon finishing his Masters in Social Work. Hassan has been working in the army, nationally and abroad, and is at the moment on disability aid supported by the army. Danny owns and administrates his own high profiled security business. Khalid has a Bachelor-degree in Education and works as a teacher at IPS (Indiana Public School) while Ike has pursued a carrier working with the criminal court system, but is currently staying home due to sickness. Lorraine works for government services and has earlier worked as a governor`s assistant in one of the States down South. Both Catherine and Delina work as nurses, while Catherine also is combining work with studying her Masters in social work. Aisha works at a University and has a Bachelor degree in administration while my last interviewee, Charles, works as a Prison Chaplin in one of Indiana`s State prisons. Due to statistics on African-American adults ages 25 and older, 16,5% of black men and 17,7% of black woman held bachelor`s degrees - compared to about 31.7 % of white men and 27% of white woman.¹⁴⁷ Compared to the statistics, my male-interviewees show a unique tendency through their representation of College graduated African-American male whereas 7/8 has obtained a Bachelor degree or a higher diploma. Also my female interviewees are overly represented through their educational status compared to the overall percentage of African-American females, where all of them have obtained at least a Bachelor`s degree.

¹⁴⁷U.S Bureau of Census. “Percent of People 25 years Old and Over Who Have Completed High School or College, by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex. Selected years 1940 to 2002,” Available from: <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/tabA-2> (accessed November 10, 2008).

In modern time the church has throughout the time continued to serve numerous function for members of the Black community. In the United States, black people are currently represented in a numerous of different religious groups. My informants represent a variety of denominational backgrounds mostly within the protestant tradition. 2/3 of my informants come from Protestant backgrounds, whereas five have background from the Baptist Church, one from the Apostolic Church, two from the Methodist Church, one from the Church of Christ in God. In addition to this, two informants came from the Catholic Church, and one from the Episcopal Church is also represented. Despite of the variety of denominational background, they all have one thing in common: they grew up in homes where their family practiced Christianity in terms of going to church at least once a week, whereas a majority of my informants also attended Sunday school classes. I find it interesting that many of my informants recall their memories of church as the place “where they grew up.” Many researchers including clinicians have recognized the extensive role churches often play in people`s lives,¹⁴⁸ in a variety of ways. As a discriminated group facing multiple challenges due to lack of privileges in the American society, the Church might become a filter for their needs in terms of providing a support system. While asking my informants about their relationship to Christianity during childhood and teenager years they told me different individual stories based on individual scenes and situations. Despite varieties in upbringing, according to many of my male and female interviewees, prayers seemed to be a common practice in most of their Christian homes during childhood. One of my informants, Danny grew up in Church with his single mother and three siblings. While sharing from his childhood, he recalled some powerful memories from his spiritual and social context that still influence his picture of God even today:

Because in the Black Church, you got a lot of single moms raising their children.... So when things are rough, like in my house growing up, and with my mother and my three brothers-when it was time to pay a light bill we prayed, you know, the water bill and the food. She prayed to Jesus, and something would happen. So how are you going to tell this woman, who through every hardship she has had have been praying to Jesus- that he is not real? In her understanding you can`t tell her that. The thing is that the beauty about God is that God knows and understands our mindsets, he know how we told and how our faith has been, he is not going to answer our prayers because you might not have been this way, or have might not understood it this way. He understands you asking in the name of Jesus.

¹⁴⁸ Paulette Moore Hines, and Nancy Boyd- Franklin in Mc Goldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 95-97.

This reflection upon Danny`s situation growing up during hardship in the inner-city ghetto shows us the need and importance of faith, and how faith can be shaped by the surrounding context. From an internal perspective it shows a child`s respect towards a mother and her faith in Jesus who acts in their life when they need it the most. Danny still underlined the strength and uniqueness of his mother`s faith, despite of now being a Muslim adult, saying; “God understands you asking in the name of Jesus. You can`t take it from a woman who has been raising her children by herself.”

Even after converting to Islam, he confirmed Jesus` power because of how it impacted him positively as a child; Jesus took the place of the absent man in the family, and showed his presence through responding to their needs. According to statistics, American women are more likely to be active church goers than their men.¹⁴⁹ The American sociologist Elijah Anderson is emphasizing how the environment surrounding the inner city ghettos puts single mothers in a fragile position.¹⁵⁰ This lack of protection might increase the risk for your children as they grow up to be victimized of gang pressures and easily become engaged in criminal activities.¹⁵¹ Lacking a family unit, many women seek church involvement. The majority of my interviewees (even those living in a two parent household) stated that they went together with their mother to church. Danny`s story gives an example that a journey from a poor ghetto family into a decent¹⁵² family can be reached through church involvement. Families thus obtain aid of strong religious components, it instills its members a certain degree of self-respect, civility and even despite prevailing impoverished living conditions, and a positive view of the future. According to Elijah Anderson,¹⁵³ many such decent families become highly protective of their children.¹⁵⁴ But for these low income families, who have moved on to a decent family`s self-respect through the Church, the opportunities of moving out is rare. The hardship of the ghetto and the code of the streets will most probably be a tough challenge through the upbringing of their children. Yet, in such a negative and predictable setting, we must not forget how many, including my interviewee Danny (through his mother`s involvement in church),

¹⁴⁹ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public life. Report: “Faith Based Funding Backed: But Church State Doubts Abound.” *IV Religion in American life*. Available from: <http://www.pewforum.org/events/0410/report/4.php>.

¹⁵⁰ Elijah Anderson. *The Code of the Streets. Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company), 42-43

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Decent family: Almost everyone residing in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America. This term is established in order to differentiate the degrees of alienation, representing an opposite pole in terms of value orientation, from the “street family”.

¹⁵³ Elijah Anderson. *The Codes of the Street*. (2000), 44.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.,144.

experience a social integration through religion, despite of being categorized as a street family. For Danny it provided him with both an external positive network, and (followed by) an internal spirituality which provided a stability in terms of security in Jesus as a provider.

4.2 Christian upbringing and the feeling of alienation

On the other hand, other stories represented have shed light to another interesting perspective; which according to the interviews seem to be a collective experience among many of my informants. In 11 of the 12 of the interviews, the “feeling of alienation” in their Christian identity was related to the “whiteness” of Christianity, which in the conversation was termed as a reality that was “too alien and distanced” to their own identity, based on being black, second class, and minority. Some of my informants go the whole distance to frame the Christian concept as “unreachable,” at least from their own perspectives as black children, growing up in the 60`es and 70`es. One example is one of my interviewees who in the interview asked; “How can I ever change my color?” When I asked Lorraine about her Christian upbringing, she told me about a conversation she had with a friend of hers about their upbringing in church:

The way I was thought it was not logic or something I could be attached to, the way we were thought as African Americans. And as a young child we just didn` t see ourselves, you know, when you see pictures, think about it, if everything you see in the Bible and if everything which is good, is white. How do you ever see yourself as a little kid, being a part of that? You can` t be an angel, you can` t be close to God, you can be nothing. So logically and intellectually it` s going to tell you that it is something that is not right with that or with you, so you are going to look outside of that to somewhere you might fit.

Also Khalid remembered his reflections which used to go through his head while being with his mother at church, attending Sunday school class:

You know, also culturally as in the western world, everything was made to look white, you know, as you began to think already as a kid. You know, how can this image get into your heart? You got Abraham as being white, Moses as being white, and this is what you think in your head, and then you see Jesus, or some re-envision of Jesus as being some Italian guy with long hair, and beard whatever. He was this hippie-dude. Consequently Jesus had to be some kind of an Arab, initially. So you know that cultural image, there was no access or connection there, because of that you sort of felt like you had a feeling, or I had a feeling that I couldn` t articulate because I was so young; wait a minute, you have to worship this white guy or whatever the case might be. And he is suppo-

sedly the son of God. Then you try to put all this stuff together and make one plus one being two, I just couldn't do it.

Charles used to go to the Catholic Church which he frames as a ministry with Old Irish missionary sisters from Boston, Massachusetts: "I remember that the priest was obsessed, I mean they were good people and they really tried to get us a good education, but they had this attitude where they were trying to civilize us. You know the stories they would tell, what happen to us if we didn't do what."

He also attended a Catholic School with an all white staff, while the majority of the students were black. Being an African-American child, he was approached with the same kind of attitude that he met in Church, but even worse. The teachers always accused- and held the black children responsible for things they had not done. Describing himself as a nervous kind of guy, never being in trouble through life, it was a tough experience when some white hell-raising kids accused him as responsible in the classroom for no reason. The teachers always "knew" he was responsible (even if he was not) and turned hostile.

This example is not unique according to my informants' stories; from their view, it seemed like the church structure was functioning as a mirror of the dominant surrounding society structure, where it became a micro institution of the white social macro structure. Even within the black Christian Church they felt as "second hand citizens", without the right qualifications that were required to reach the right connection with the supreme God. God who was supposed to be their "comfort in distress," became alien and distanced.

4.2.1 Family household and upbringing

Two of my interviewees are single, while two are divorced and the eight remaining are still in their first marriage. Asking my informants about their family background, four of my informants were raised in a single parent household (whereas three of them are males), while the remaining eight were raised with both mother and father present. This shows that the majority of my informants were raised in a "two-parent" home. This is not representative for the African- American family structure. One of my informants, Ike described the situation as follows:

Let's face it, we don't have a population of woman in the African-American community who are in a position where they are able to be respected just because their looks from men. Something like

79% of black children are born out of wedlock. So we have women out there who don't know what it is like to be respected. They have literally no idea. Then I will take you to another issue. I talk to my children often, and I say; you guys are really lucky! And you are spoiled. And they say; what are you talking about daddy? First of all, you are African- Americans. You are born in wedlock and conceived in wed-lock. There are no outside children hanging around. No stepchild

He underlined the privilege of being born within wedlock as an African-American, and stated that it is only 21% of the African-American population who are born within wedlock, like his children. According to recent statistics 34% of all black children in the U.S are being raised by married couple families, compared to 75% of white children.¹⁵⁵ Third, he continued, "my children have always been growing up with expectation, not only the understanding, but the expectations that they are going to college. They didn't have to worry about that, all they had to do was to be able to get in, because I pretty much told them that I would kill them (smile) if they didn't. That was my major threat. If you don't go, Hi - I have to kill you! And it worked." Ike presented the story as something which is extraordinary in his cultural context, with due reason; statistics indicate that nearly 50% of all African-American families are raised in female, single, parent homes, versus 16% of the white children.¹⁵⁶¹⁵⁷ He pointed to the connection between family structure and achievements, also confirmed of several social scientists, indicating that single parent are more likely to be on welfare and unemployed, resulting in higher risk for their children to achieve low at school, drop out or join a gang.¹⁵⁸

Many of my informants described extended family such as grandmothers, uncles, aunties, cousins and friends of the family as having an important and active role in their upbringing. This is not uncommon in the African-American family structure, where, according to Hines and Boyd Franklin, the collective value of the extended family is emphasized to a larger degree, compared to white Americans.¹⁵⁹ In contrast to the stereotype of Europe individual premise of "I think, therefore I am," the African stereotyped philosophy is "We are, therefore, I am."¹⁶⁰ To describe African identity as a parallel to collective thinking, is obviously a generalization. However, I still think that there are a certain essence in the African- American ethnicity which is based on the collective values and principles adopted by the African culture,

¹⁵⁵ Vital Statistics. Vital Signs: Statistics That Measure the State of Racial Inequality. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education Issue No 59* (Spring 2008).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Dinesh D'Souza. *The end of Racism* (New York, NY: Free press paperbacks, 1996),7.

¹⁵⁸ "Family structure and Children's Educational Outcomes." *Research Brief* No. 1, Nov 2005/Center for Marriage and Families.

¹⁵⁹ Hines and Boyd-Franklin (1982) in McGoldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 87.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

not just based on internal heritage, but also as a matter of “togetherness,” as a response to alienation from the white hegemony discourse. In this matter I find it important to underline that there exist a differentiation within both the white and the African-American family structure including both individuality and collectivity, yet my interviewees perceives the collectivity in the African-American family structure as a “strength” and as a positive quality.

4.3 What is black identity?

In this section I concentrate on the crisis of identity at a micro level. The term “African-American,”¹⁶¹ compared to “Black” refers to an identity that is cultural as well as ethnic. Other ethnic groups are rightly identified by culture or nationality rather than by dissention. It is also important to notice that “White” and “Black” are not cultures, as for example Irish American and Italian American are.¹⁶² However “black” culture is sometimes understood narrowly to mean indigenous African-American culture (that is the culture of African slaves in North America and their descendants.)¹⁶³ The term “white” culture is conceived variously as WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), Anglo-Christian, Euro-American, European and Western.

There exist many theories in several fields due to the complexity of black identity. What is Black Identity, as an African-American identity, based on? In the landmark book “The Souls of Black Folk” in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois famously analyzed the Black American as possessing what he called a double consciousness, caught between a self-conception as an American and as a person of African descent. As Du Bois put it: “The Negro ever feels his “two-ness”- an American and a Negro; two souls, two thoughts two un reconciled strivings....two warring ideals in one dark body, whose “godeed” strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹⁶⁴

Du Bois`s perception of the Blacks seem to apply well to black Americans over a century later; the double consciousness¹⁶⁵ he referred to is often claimed to have the same relevance for today`s black Americans. His observation is typically made with an implication that “after

¹⁶¹ African- Americans are descendants of Africans who were brought to the Unites States as slaves.

¹⁶² Elaine Pinderhughes (1982) in Mc Goldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 108.

¹⁶³ Tommie Shelby. *We who are black* (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 163.

¹⁶⁴ W.E.B Du Bois, Brent Hayes Edwards. *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press Inc. 2007), 8.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Gilroy. *Small Acts: Thoughts on the politics of Black Cultures* (London and New York: Werner Søderstrom Oy, 1993), 103, 123,

all this time, nothing has really changed, “that whites remains implacable opposed to including blacks in the American fabric, leaving black people eternally torn asunder.”¹⁶⁶ An attitude that many might find surprising was confirmed by some of my interviewees through the interviews. People still experience the fear of being black, fear of harassment, fear of getting caught as despite of being not guilty, and fear of getting insulted randomly in public doing shopping in grocery stores. However, as time continues new contexts have to be faced, and the double consciousness is developed and shaped due to the socio-cultural background including class divisions within the black culture, surrounding environment and multicultural and national context. We live in 2009, and the context and setting in North America has also changed due to immigration from especially Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean. Black America today is permeated by a new kind of double consciousness that has strayed far beyond the one Du Bois examined in 1903.

According to the American philosopher and political theorist, Thomas Shelby¹⁶⁷ black identity can be everything from black identity based on biological genetics, to ethnical interpretations of blackness, which treats black identity as a result of shared ancestry and common cultural heritage.¹⁶⁸ Nationality has at least two meanings. It is often used to mean citizenship in a territorially sovereign state. Shelby further underlines how nationality also has a meaning that is quite similar to ethnicity, pointing to how “an ethnic identity can be considered a nation when the people in question think of themselves and their culture as derived from a particular geographical location, where the relevant territory is considered ancestral “homeland” and a source of group pride.”¹⁶⁹ At last there exist a cultural understanding of blackness, which rests on the claim that there is an identifiable ensemble of believes, values, conventions, traditions, and practices that is distinctively black. On this model black identity is tied either to cultural heritage or to biological descent.¹⁷⁰

This model can help explaining the complexity of an African-American`s identity. The Norwegian social anthropologist, Marianne Gullestad, stresses the importance of focusing on the power to categorize and define others. Gullestad finds in this analysis a cultural substance to new ideas about racism, which is based on the underlying fact that discrimination towards

¹⁶⁶ Shelby. *We who are black*, 1.

¹⁶⁷ Tommie Shelby. Professor of African and African- American Studies and of Philosophy at Harvard University.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 211,

individuals and groups more often is explained by de-reunifying cultural differences than with the arguments of separated races.¹⁷¹¹⁷²

The African- American abolitionist, Martin Robison Delany¹⁷³ attempts to advance and complexities Alexis de Tocqueville's¹⁷⁴ theories about similarity and equality, (a theory arguing for the idea of equality leading to the idea of similarity indicating that human being often have to feel similar, in order to feel that they fit together)¹⁷⁵ through putting them into an African- American context. He insists, that the end of the slavery did not mean the end of black oppression and race discrimination, because the stigmatizing of forced servanthood will always be the identity-mark on their easily observable skin color.

In this setting, I find it relevant to present the Caribbean born sociologist Stuart Hall, who points out that there are two principal ways of thinking about cultural identities: identity as being, which offers a sense of unity and commonality and identity as becoming, or a process of identification, which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation. Hall explains how the first model is necessary but the second one is truer to our postcolonial conditions.¹⁷⁶

Hall offers these two models, not as a theoretical distinction, although it certainly can be mapped on to the dispute between essentialists and anti-essentialists, but as a strategic distinction.¹⁷⁷ The first model assumes that there is some intrinsic and essential content to any identity which is defined by either a common origin or a common structure of experience or both. Struggling against existing construction of a particular identity takes the form of contesting negative images with positive ones, and of trying to discover the "authentic" and "original" content of identity. Basically, the struggle over representation of identity here takes the form of offering one fully constituted, separated and distinct identity in place of another.¹⁷⁸

The second model emphasizes:

The impossibility of such fully constituted separated and distinct identities. It denies the existence of authentic and original identities based in a universally shared origin or experience. Identities are

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷² Marianne Gullestad. *DET NORSKE sett med andre øyne* (Universitetsforlaget:Oslo, 2002), 149.

¹⁷³ b.1812-d.1885

¹⁷⁴ Tocqueville 1835-40.

¹⁷⁵ Gullestad. *DET NORSKE sett med nye øyne*, 82.

¹⁷⁶ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay. *Questions of cultural identity* (SAGE publications Ltd: London, 1993), 393.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 89.

here always relational and incomplete, in process. Any identity depends upon its difference from, its negation of, some other term, even as the identity of the latter term depends upon its difference from, its negation of the former.¹⁷⁹

Hall is underlining how “identities are constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as the changing same.” “Not the so-called return to roots but a coming to term with our routes.”¹⁸⁰

They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectuality, even if the belongingness, the “suffering into the story” through which identities arise, is partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field.¹⁸¹

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, he is stressing the importance of “understanding them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific emancipative strategies”. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical naturally constituted unity- an “identity” in its traditional meaning (that is, an all inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation).¹⁸² Most of all, according to Hall: “identities are constructed through, not outside difference.” Through Hall’s definition: “identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative.”¹⁸³ He underlines the radically disturbing recognition that “it is only through the relation to “the Other,” the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called it constitutive outside that the positive meaning of any term-and thus its identity-can be constructed.”¹⁸⁴ Hall underlines in the second model of identity that “identities are always temporary unstable effects of relations which define identities by marking differences. Thus the emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities rather than on a singular identity and on the

¹⁷⁹ Paul Gilroy (94) in Hall and Du Guy. *Questions of cultural identity*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993 in Hall and Du Guy. *Questions of cultural identity* (1996), 4.

connections and articulations between the fragments or differences.”¹⁸⁵ The French philosopher Jacques Derrida, argues how that identity constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles - man/woman, etc. What is peculiar to the second presented model of identity is thus reduced to the function of an accident as opposed to the essentiality of the first. It is the same with the black-white relationship, in which white, of course is perceived as equivalent to “human being”. “Woman” and “black” are thus “marks” (*i.e.* marked terms) in contrast to the unmarked terms of (“man and “white”).¹⁸⁶

Hall underlines that “we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about “the one experience, one identity, without acknowledging its other side; the rupture and discontinuities,” which in my discussion constitutes the African- American uniqueness. This African- American uniqueness can also be framed as a collective identity or essentialism,¹⁸⁷ based on a shared consciousness of black history. The arguments for a positive obligation to develop this shared consciousness in black culture is often based on focusing on the American slaveholders, who prevented slaves from reproducing their African culture, and that historically blacks have often been misinformed or even prevented from learning about their heritage.¹⁸⁸ As a response to this racist ideology, maintaining that blacks have no worthwhile culture of their own, neither past nor present, and that therefore they should allow themselves to be assimilated into a “civilized” culture. Shelby underlines that “this assault on the value of black cultural contributions has been so thoroughly damaging to the self-esteem of blacks that many family struggle to identify with and take pride in their unique cultural heritage.”¹⁸⁹ In order to reclaim a self-respect and dignity as a people, blacks are encouraged to participate in, celebrate and identify with pro blacks organizations and movements. According to Shelby “it is not before African-American fully understands this, that they will see a collective identity rooted in black cultural traditions, we can define this as a constitutive part of black liberation.”¹⁹⁰ Is it possible to be liberated, in terms of acknowledging the past, and move on to a more complex hybrid and fluid identity, where your identity is not stuck in just a limited “oneness”? From a psychological point of view it would be natural to think that construction of African-American collec-

¹⁸⁵ Hall and Du Gay. *Questions of cultural identity* (1996), 89.

¹⁸⁶ Laclau (1990):33 quoted in Hall and Du Gay: *Questions of cultural identity*, 5.

¹⁸⁷ Kevin, Gosine, “Essentialism Versus Complexity: Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 27, no 1. (2002),82.

¹⁸⁸ Shelby. *We who are black*, 169.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*,169.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*,169.¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*,142.

tive identities will be strengthened from within as long as a dominant culture represent the African- American in un-differentiated and stigmatized terms.

It seems there has been a hegemonic constriction of blackness, which has been forced upon the African-American people, threatening them to become nothing more than a simple object. The idea of biological “race” as an ideology was used to impute an inherent and inalterable set of physical characteristics to the subordinate groups, an “essential nature” that supposedly set them apart from the dominant group and that explained why they could legitimately be exploited.”¹⁹¹ A dominant idea of cultural or collective identity has stigmatized a minority group into an un-differentiated “oneness” based upon negative generalizations. This mentioned hindrance can also be labeled as racism.¹⁹² The “Other” has become discriminated due to ethnicity; a hegemonic discourse from a dominant power exercised on the minority group is often based on social illusions, like belief that blacks are intellectually inferior.¹⁹³ As a response to this negative labeling, blacks have through the history up to today established several types of affirmative action movements as an attempt to protect their own integrity and dignity, based on the right to equal human treatment. Blacks resistance due to this labeling has been characterized as aggressive in its form (from a white point of view), and has been used to generalize and stigmatize the black nature as aggressive, primitive and violent.

4.3.1 Psychological theories on ethnicity as a collective group identity

Ethnicity remains a vital force in the United States, a major form of group identification, and a major determinant of our family patterns and belief system. The premise of equality, on which United States was founded, required Americans to give primary allegiance to their national identity, fostering the myth of the “melting pot”, the notion that group distinctions between people were unimportant.” But who has melted? Who decided this idyllic and world-wide famous term, and how do we define it correctly? According to Anthony Smith, “there is a dichotomy between a non-ethnic “us” and ethnic “others” which has continued to dog the concept in the field of ethnicity and nationalism.” He further applies the analogy into English

¹⁹¹ Ibid.,142.

¹⁹² Shelby, 142. Racism: “is an ideology a set of misleading and irrationally held beliefs and assumptions that serve to bring about and reinforce structural relations of oppression.”

¹⁹³ Shelby. *We who are black*, 142.

and American (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) tendency, where the term “nation” is reserved for themselves, and “ethnic” for immigrant peoples, as used for “ethnic minorities.”¹⁹⁴ I suggest that the dominant elite, is the one who to have labeled it like this. According to Greely there is an increasing evidence that ethnic values and identification are retained for many generations after immigration, and it plays a significant role in family life and personal development throughout the life cycle.¹⁹⁵ To be seen as a ethnical minority as an African-American living in a multicultural society in what is supposed to be a “melting-pot,” will also require that we do not ignore its impact on a groups culture.

According to Greely, second, third and even fourth generation Americans, as well as new immigrants, differ from the dominant culture in values, life-styles and behavior. Ethnicity has a variety of definitions, using the following definition: “those who conceive of themselves as alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others.”¹⁹⁶ “Ethnicity can describe a sense of commonality transmitted over generations by the family and reinforced by the surrounding community. It is more than religion, or national or geographical origin. It involves conscious and unconscious processes that fulfill a deep psychological need for identity and historical continuity.”¹⁹⁷

The German/American psychologist Erik Erikson,¹⁹⁸ in his classical work on identity (“Childhood and Society”), in 1950, began to develop a framework for understanding how the individual is linked to the ethnic group or society.¹⁹⁹ He defines “identity as a process located in the core of the individual, and yet also in the core of his or her communal culture.” In this description the final stage of human development concerns coming to terms with our cultural identity; “For only an identity safely anchored in the “patrimony” of a cultural identity can produce a workable psychosocial equilibrium.”²⁰⁰ Work on ethnic minorities by the American psychiatrists Klein, Cobbs, Giordano and Riotta-Sirey “demonstrated the fact that people who are secure in their identity, can act with greater freedom, flexibility and openness to others of

¹⁹⁴ John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. *Ethnicity*. (Oxford. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁹⁵ Lieberman, (1974), Teper, (1977); Gelfand and Kutzik (1979) in Mc Goldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family therapy*. 1982

¹⁹⁶ Monica McGoldrick, John K Pearce and Joseph Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family therapy* (New York. London: The Guilford press, 1982), 3.

¹⁹⁷ Giordano & Giordano (1977) in Goldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family therapy*. (1982), 4-5.

¹⁹⁸ b. 1902-d. 1994. Served as Professor at Harvard Medical School (1934-1935), Yale Medical School (1936-1939) and University at California at Berkeley (1939-1951).

¹⁹⁹ McGoldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 5.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

different cultural backgrounds.”²⁰¹ This theory also points at the importance of being recognized, seen and accepted as an ethnical minority group in order to integrate into a dominating society fully. In line with this, if people received negative or distorted images of their ethnic background or learn values from the larger society that conflict with those of their family, they often develop a sense of inferiority and self-hate that can lead to aggressive behavior and discrimination toward other ethnic groups.²⁰²

A huge amount of American`s latest immigration groups (compared to 20 years ago) consist of black and colored groups from Latin / South American, Caribbean, Africa and Asia. United States is closer to a “melt pot” function today, thinking of the multicultural mix, than ever before. This does not necessarily make today`s African- American experience as a possibly “felt oppressed identity” unique. Still the Eurocentric power seem to own the “we” discourse and set the standards within most of the societies` institutions. The multicultural society seem to be treated as “one” despite its various cultures, including African-Americans, who are most likely used to be defined in the collective term: “the Other.” As Stuart Hall points out, in contrast to the essentialist model of identity, we need to focus on the discontinued points of identification, and point to the fact that the blacks as any ethnic group, differentiate their identities from within.

Du Bois sometimes sees the identity construction of being an African and American as a gift of a second sight, at other times, it appears as a disability, a process of splitting and fragmentations rather than an index of increase and authentic doubling.²⁰³ It shows the challenges, which remains in many African-Americans attempts` to integrate into the American Society. Race and ethnicity has also been a major factor here since those whose skin color marked them as different always suffered more discrimination than others as they could not pass for locals as other immigrants might try to do. This has according to Gilroy, “left immigrants who are noticeably different from the dominant physical attributes, who cannot hide their ethnic and racial identification. Often those who look physically similar are lumped together as one group, even when they are not.”²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Gilroy. *Small Acts: Thoughts On The Politics Of Black Cultures*,160.

²⁰⁴ McGoldrick, Pearce and Giordano. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*,15.

As I move on I aim to discuss why people have a certain perception based on a given interpretation of black culture. I also aim to challenge the stigmatized representation of blackness both in black and white discourses. Is blackness just a “negative destination” based on Platon`s essentialist theories on human beings being unchangeable essences? Where everything we do and create is just shadows of essences which exist outside our horizons? What do people associate with black identity and culture? And how do black people perceive themselves, and express their blackness through their personal experiences from life?

4.3.2 Black identity-a collective identity?

A majority of my informants shared their experiences based on deprivation and alienation while telling me about their upbringing as being African-American in a North American Society. They all mention the brutal “slave trade history” as a collective foundation for their identity formation and as a part of the core in their collective culture based upon their history: on the other hand there are a common disagreement among African -Americans whether there are reasons for stagnating on the melancholia of the memories as the essence core, or continue shaping our identities due to the surrounding context. How do my interviewees reflect upon the issue of integration? In an attempt of answering this question, I will in this section take a look at how my informants are reflecting upon the African- American culture and its roots:

David:

We believe African-Americans as a whole, we are a new people on the planet, due to our circumstance that came going through our slavery. People from Norway even 120 years back, and they brought with them the culture and history. We don`t have that kind of history. We can`t call back to African and say: we have a business send me the products. How are you doing grandpa? We can`t do that. We are a new people, and that is very special.

Ike told me how he comes from an ancestry which was abused, left with a dishonor:

Many people think that African-Americans do not take advantage of their opportunities in front of them. Especially when you meet black and white Africans from South Africa-they say that there are hardly no difference at all. Apartheid is simply the right of the white man, his forces, compare it to what Hitler said, and George Wallace and Ku Klux Klan. Yes, we had slavery, but now the biggest in policy is integration. We have a community under segregation rules, which do very well today. We can look at the history, when they started the segregation; we became very successful,

so successful that the Caucasians killed the people who started it. The white people wanted to be superior, and didn't want to lose power, and therefore they killed. My point is that we do better when we do for ourselves. But unfortunately there are so many of our people who do not believe they can do it themselves, but have to depend on the white men's system.

The quote by Ike, underlines the dilemmas attached to African-American's past and today's integration policies. This particular perspective of favoring black nationalism, seem to have influenced the African-American's attitude and limited their lifestyle. Now, he thinks it is time for the African-Americans to be freed from "the white man's system." Also Khalid shared similar views on this subject, but he takes a step further and confirms that we have to get rid of judging everything at the past. In contrast to Ike he underlined the importance of "not blaming the "white man", and change the stagnating, judging attitude, to an acting attitude."

My cousin "Isac" who also is a strong Christian, he once said; immigration for African-Americans was one of the worst things that ever happened, and I didn't understand it for a long time, but now I understand it, because we were being integrated into a society without disciplinary steps of measures given to us. So you give a poor class people a whole bunch of material without giving them the education and the discipline that it takes to sustain it and make it grow. It is like giving you a plant, without given any instructions on how much sunlight the plant need or how much water in needs, so whatever, then you try and figure out what has to happen. The plant is gonna die because even after of all your attempts is it is gonna die, and that is what has been done to the African Americans. Once you cut out education, you get cut off from society.

Lorraine, one of my female interviewees offered an interesting view in our conversation about African American culture. She felt that whites are more divided than African-Americans in terms of exposure, and thought that much of the reasons go back to slavery, in what is acceptable and what is not. "I don't want to get into the lazy title, but it is turn and it is a lot easier to hold on to something, than to explore something different. And then we are concerned about something, how people think of us, you know; will I be accepted?"

Khalid further stated that the problem is that African-American culture has not valued itself (the importance of being confident in its identity in order to integrate) which brings us into the area of the "we" and "you" discourse. "Who defines the "other"? Even though he admitted that there still are discriminating factors which influences the African-American situation, he underlined that he is tired of the African-Americans always "quinting" a finger at external situations, taking the victim role. Phrased with other words: the discrimination is reality, but

in order to cope with self-respect we need to continue moving forward: “There is something that we haven’t done...that is what I am getting at. There are many things that we haven’t done, and Malcolm said it himself, he told people; “what have me and my generation done? We have done nothing. Don’t you too do the same thing, and sit around on your butts around the mall.”

The Caribbean psychiatrist and philosopher, Franz Fanon²⁰⁵ once said: “suddenly the Black men were freed from slavery and they didn’t even get a chance to be a part of the fight in getting released.” He compares it with a patient in a mental hospital, not knowing what to do with himself the day he is released: “Just as when one tells a much improved patient that in a few days he will be discharged from the hospital, he thereupon suffers a relapse, so the announcement of the liberation of the black slaves produced psychoses and sudden deaths.”²⁰⁶ This quote of Fanon offers insight in the African-American’s reality, and shows how the label “laziness,” which often is used as negative markers and stigmatizing generalizations, was not even a self-chosen stage of reality, but a forced life-style. This was a result a dominant power using forces towards a group without any chances to defend themselves. According to the African-American Reverent, Jeremiah Wright: “the tragedy about the whole “integration era” was that African-Americans did not understand what integration meant. Integration means the coming together as equals to the table.”²⁰⁷

Several of my informants pointed to the fact that Blacks are less educated than whites and stated that is what the problem is with today’s integration of blacks in America. Khalid who works at Indiana public school means that African- Americans are an uneducated people in general, because the black people has been beaten up so much. “I don’t want to get on this oppressing “ban- wagon,” he says.

Based on the fact that God created us all equal. You need your tools and weapons to start doing something, and that is what is gonna lead into a high self-esteem. That is what is gonna lead you not, you look at another men, not because of the color he is, but because you are equal. You see him as a person with the same potential, the same type of being harm, insecurity, and the same thinking and the same desires. It is not giving you some type of coping skills, its giving you greater tools.

²⁰⁵ b, 1925- d. 1961.

²⁰⁶ Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin White Masks* (Grove Press: New York, 1967), 220-222.

²⁰⁷ Dr. Jeremiah Wright, “THE MESSAGE: Looking back, Looking Around, Looking Ahead” *Trumpet Magazine Excerpt*, May 2006, 10-13. Available from: <http://www-trumpetmag.com.scibd.com/doc/2385891/Trumpet-Magazine/>

Despite of Khalid`s awareness of injustice and inequality, yet, he meant that some of the solution of the African-American dilemma would be to start looking at our fellow American beyond colors, as a person with the same potentials, strength and weaknesses. My interviewees had different approaches on whether they should still fight for their rights as a discriminated people, blaming it on the white man, or whether they should continue ignoring the tension, and rather focus on strength, achieving their dreams.

In the previous sections various dilemmas due to African-Americans` integration, have been discussed. In addition to a mental change from within, external factors also have to be examined. This leads into following section where I stress the reasons behind why blacks appear to be less educated than the whites in the U.S. Based on the law that every citizen has equal rights in the American society, the educational system, seems to receive blame in the field of integration and racism from a several angles. In 1954, The Supreme Court`s decision about the desegregation of public schools, but did not make any difference for many years. Desegregation means that African- American children could no longer be denied the right to go to school that were “for whites only.” Desegregation did not mean that white children would now come to Black schools and learn their story, their history, heritage, legacy, beauty or strength. Jeremiah Wrigth, points out that there is a difference between desegregation, which was a legal issue, and equality, which is a spiritual and moral issue.²⁰⁸ Still, African-Americans are enrolled in predominately white schools. This raises the question of the way teachers, principals and administrators treat the students. According to federal statistics conducted by Harvard, more than two-thirds of all special education students are male. The Harvard study revealed that African-American students are three times more likely to be referred to special education under the “mental retardation” heading and two times more likely to be referred to special education under “emotionally disturbed” heading than white students are.²⁰⁹ Losten and Orfield who conducted the study underlines that “the research doesn`t attempt to depict a definitive causal link to racial discrimination, yet the research does suggest that unconscious racial bias, stereotypes, and other race-linked factors have a significant impact on the patterns of identification and quality of services for minority children, and particu-

²⁰⁸ Reverend Doctor Jeremiah A. Wright, via the May 2006 edition of this newsletter, *The Truphet*. <http://www.Sweetness.light.com/archive/racist-jeremiah-wright-on-white-supremacy>.

²⁰⁹ Yvette Owo. “African-Americans still face discrimination in schools,” *April 30, 2004*. (December 10, 2008).

larly for African- American children.”²¹⁰ Logically in this case, many might suggest that poverty is the reason behind disabilities tendencies among members of low-wealth minority groups, especially due to the impact of the limited quality on nutrition and health care. Yet, despite of poverty issues, most recent research shows that blacks in every state are overrepresented in this category. The Harvard research shows that the theory of socioeconomic factors and poverty fails to account for the extreme differences between the black overrepresentation and the Hispanic underrepresentation.²¹¹ According to the conduct, “nationally and in many other states the disparity in identification rates for mental retardation and amoutona disturbance between blacks and Hispanics is greater than the disparity between blacks and whites.” However, Hispanics, like blacks are at far greater risk than whites for poverty, for example by exposure to environmental toxin in impoverished neighborhoods, and low-level academic achievement in reading and math. The author underlines that “the high variation in identification rates among minority groups with similar levels of poverty and academic failure casts serious doubt on assertions by some researchers that it is primarily poverty and not bias that creates these deep racial disparities.”²¹²

According to a report from the Lumina Foundation for Educations, nearly a third more African- American men are in prison than in college.²¹³ Over 35 years ago, Bernard Coard wrote a pamphlet called “How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System.” It underlined the disproportionate number of exclusions, the excessive labeling of black boys as having special educational needs, and how low teacher expectations undermine a young person`s motivation.²¹⁴ It also underlines how different ethnical and cultural groups require knowledge, tolerance and awareness about each other`s norms and customs. In that sense we can critically question how a multicultural “colorless” education system can confirm students` identity in terms of the right acknowledgement and affirmation of one`s full identity. Identity has everything to do with how people acquire a sense of belonging and how they situated themselves within a wider social context. According to Kevin Gosine, “a multicultural and antiracism education oversimplify the dynamics of cultural diversity and racism,

²¹⁰ Edited by Daniel J Losen and Gary Orfield. “*Racial Inequity in Special Education.*”

<http://gseweb.harvard.edu>. (Cambridge, MA USA: The Civil Right Projects at Harvard University and Harvard Education Press (2002),6.

²¹¹ Ibid, 7.

²¹² Ibid, 7-8.

²¹³ Baltimore. “*African –American,*” May 23, 2003.

²¹⁴ Fraser Neil. 2007. “A bad rap”. *The Guardian*. August 10.

because both approaches fail to adequately consider the level of identity that entail the hybrid, contradictory and fluid character of racial and cultural diversity.”²¹⁵

Even though there are several factors attached to the alienation of blacks, racial bias might be an underestimated focus. In an article published on August 10, 2007, Neil Fraser, a well know musician and producer from England, is arguing in his article on racist education,²¹⁶ that black youth has only one image in the media and MTC and its clones, and it is a bad one: sexually overt; rapacious; materialistic. He stresses the importance of focusing on the various cultures and dynamics, including positive elements within the African- American culture. “Some go to university; many have a trade; some are religious; others are sporty, computer mad, ballet dancers ... and some even like classical music.”²¹⁷

Multiple factors are still pointing to that the labeling of the “racialized other” to a static, externally rooted identity still seem to exist in the U.S educational system. The big question is whether this forces an African-American minority student to take the already given and fixed position as the racialized “Other.” It might does- in an indirect way. Several acknowledged researches conducted on the field, stress that school authorities often have lower expectations to minority students, or are stereotyping them before any attempt of constructive dialog.²¹⁸ The dropout rate in the U.S educational system might be a consequence due to that particular treatment, as a fulfilling prophecy where Black students are living up to the low expectations. Not having one`s need met in terms of acknowledgment, and expectations due to intellectual adequate tasks, easily makes people capitulate. Another way of responding to this negative labeling is, according to a study presented by Fordham, is to turn into a “raceless persona” in order to achieve goals emphasized by the dominant society.²¹⁹ A raceless persona entails minimizing one`s relationship to the Black community to circumvent the stigma attached to being Black. On the other hand, there are sacrifices; according to the research, Fordham noted that the decision of Black students to adopt a raceless persona is negatively approved by peers.²²⁰ In this stage, conflict often develops: you need to choose; “having their behavior constantly monitored by less successful peers drains the energy of students that might other-

²¹⁵ James (2001), Pon (2000), Walcott (1993), in Kevin Gosine. “Essentialism Versus Complexity: Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship.” *Canadian Journal of Education* 27,1(2002):81-100.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ See: ”The way he moves.”

²¹⁹ Fordham (1988) in Gosine, Kevin. “*Essentialism versus Complexity; Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship*”, 84.

²²⁰ Ibid.

wise be devoted to “the pursuit of academic excellence and other creative endeavors.”²²¹

Through presenting these results, I attempt to underline the high stress factor related to the in-between status, (or “the double consciousness” introduced by Du Bois earlier in the chapter) especially during high school years, where one’s sensibility level and awareness of identity formation issues are higher than usual. Waters research on how various forces influenced the construction of identities of second-generation Caribbean youth in the U.S, showed that youth from middle class Caribbean families, who have more frequent contact with white Americans, have better opportunities for social advancement, and are more likely to identify themselves as Caribbean. Those from lower-class backgrounds, on the other hand, tended to identify more strongly with Black Americans.²²² The results demonstrate how a number of factors, most notably race, ethnicity, and social class, combine and intersect to frame consciousness and shape identities in specific social locations. I believe that these results, shows a model of how class mobility and race stigmatization are linked to each other and impact the identity construction.

Another informant; Hassan, told me that his view of being an African-American has changed with the time:

What it was once, was a community with a great amount of pride striving with one direction, strategy or some kind of movement towards opportunities, the spirit of great energy. That’s no longer existing. There is very much a disconnection, a separation in the society basically because of educational differences. The fact that it is no longer pursuable education... (He means that that is where it starts; he is giving an example) If you are not educated, how are you gonna explain a movie if you have never seen a movie? If somebody watches videos all day long, how can you relate to them, and what does it matter to them, what happens in the world? He compared the Black culture in New Orleans where he was born, with Indianapolis; in New Orleans, racism is not what it was, even during slave-time people could go to church, and they allowed them to play their music. So to come to Indianapolis was revolution; it is a horrible place. Black people who come here don’t want to be challenged. First of all people don’t care about the way they perceive the way they look. The Black people for the most part here in Indianapolis don’t care about their look. If you are in the ghetto and you are trying to make people understand that you are better than they are, they will give you trouble.

Hassan explained the changes in the African-American community as a reflection due to the changes and development in the American society, moving on from what once was a commu-

²²¹ Fordham (1998) in Gosine, Kevin. “*Essentialism versus Complexity: Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship*”, 81.

²²² Waters (1994) in Gosine, Kevin. “*Essentialism versus Complexity; Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship*”,5.

nity in pride, (civil right movement) striving with one desire and direction, into a disconnected community, based on classism and separation caused by educational differences and class differences.

From a black middle class perspective, Hassan underlined that if you are going to be accepted you need to know the code of the streets²²³:

As long as you are doing the same thing, like they are doing, they see you are a member, so you have to speak well in order to present yourself well. And then I find it crazy, because the perception is always worse....then you show up, and you are not what you thought you were....you know how screwed up it is, when you are not gonna be that way. Why walking around with those fucking house-slippers on? And then you take Vaseline, and slim your hair all way down. I don't want you around me, because if people see me around you, they are gonna think I am like you. So I "don't wanna²²⁴ be around you anyways, that is part of the separation.

With the educational differences it follows discrimination and classism within the African-American culture, which further has caused a bigger gap between the rich and poor, especially within the past 20 years. Hassan was giving an example on classism and separation within the ghetto, how the non-educated ghetto community has created its own social control system, controlling who is accepted or not by African-Americans fellows. According to Elijah Anderson, almost everyone residing in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, but there are degrees of alienation, captured by the terms "decent" and "street" family which in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories.²²⁵ The decent families share middle class values of the wider white societies but know that the open display of such values carries little weight on the street; it doesn't not provide the emblems that I can take care of myself.²²⁶ Anderson also states that there are patterns where the decent black middle class family move out of the ghetto, which results in that old neighborhoods abandoned by the African-American middle class become stripped of important stabilizing elements, which also can be referred as a "social buffer."²²⁷ The neighborhoods loses its middle-class role

²²³ The "code of the streets" refers to set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence. The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. Anderson. (2003),33.

²²⁴ African-American slang for "want to".

²²⁵ Elijah Anderson. *The code of the streets. Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc, 199), 34.

²²⁶ Ibid.,36.

²²⁷ Samuel Walker, Cassia Sphon and Miriam DeLone. *The Color of Justice: Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in America*. Second Ed. (Canada: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2000), 71.

models who helps socialize other children into middle-class values versus street values, and an important part of its natural leadership: the people who are active in neighborhood associations and local school issues.²²⁸ This creates even a bigger gap, which leaves the poor with even poorer surroundings, lacking healthy connections and social indicators which reduces the informal control over behaviors of residents.

Anderson further underlines that there is a great deal of “code switching” where a person may behave according to either set of rules, depending on the situation. “Decent people, especially young people, often put out premium on the ability to code switch.”²²⁹ On the other side, those who have less exposure (lower class) to the wider society, may have difficulty code switching, based on the fact that “imbedded with the code of the streets, they either don’t know the rules for decent behavior or may see little value in displaying such knowledge.”²³⁰ Recently a good African-American friend of mine, a family man and engineer, let us call him “De Shawn,” stated that his biggest fear in life is becoming a failure. “De Shawn” grew up in one of the ghettos in a capital city located in the Midwest. During his entire Senior High School years his mother was locked up in prison, for a minor issue, while he was at charge at home. His father was never a father, and said with his own mouth that he did not know De Shawn’s mother. During his childhood growing up with his mother and siblings in the ghetto, he had to become a tough man instantly to survive. Recently he sent me an e-mail with a reflection of his life: “This single fear to become a failure has helped me to overcome other fears and obstacles in life, what would keep someone of my background from making it in life. I am not made, but I am making it.” He stated that it is possible even from his background to succeed. He continued “I started out life as a punk and grew into a nerd. Spend my formative years as thug....you can’t make it as a nerd for a long time in the hood. Picked up some habits that would cause one to mistake me to be a player, but I was only playing myself. The nerd re-emerged and was growing by the ambition of a college frat boy. Blossomed into an entrepreneur (*aka hustler*) and eventually settled into the skin of a “*baller*”. At any point in time I can display the characteristics of a nerd, thug, player, hustler and “*baller*”

²²⁸ Ibid.,71.

²²⁹ Anderson. *The code of the streets.*, 36.

²³⁰ Ibid.,36.

“At work, you gotta show them a nerd (with a college *frat boy flava*). Every now and then I give them a little homeboy. But I didn’t spend much time as a homeboy growing up. I was a straight thug. Homeboy is a *thug-“lite”*.”

Talking about the collapse of the economy in the U.S, he comments as follows: “When the economy totally collapses, and I loose my job and house and my 40i (K) tanks, the hustler in me will make a way for me to feed my family. Let’s hope the hustler still has the hustler cause the thug is a thug for life, and full of games.”

Through this dialog, De Shawn showed the importance of role switching, based on that he is a product of his poor-ghetto background, which still is a part of his collective black identity. But he also had an internal drive which brought him into another road in life; indeed, he was code switching through his upbringing, reselling and being misunderstood: “at a time I picked up some habits that caused one to mistake me to be a playa(r), but I was just playing with myself.” His inner drive, and biggest fear to not fail, maybe as a result to what he had witness and felt living in a poverty and crime-environment, pushed him into a new direction of education and self-worth. Another set of dignity appeared as he moved on and pursued different leading roles within the college-campus and later on in the professional business world. He pursued a new set of social context which transformed and developed him into a more hybrid identity where he now was able to role switch and play not just with a limited thug identity within the ghetto-context. This is an example of Hall’s discontinues identity shaping process theories. De Shawn has come to term with his past, his given African-American identity, and has chosen to pursue life based on an independent drive, without any supportive network. He does not want to be limited to a labeled and stigmatized essentialist theory of identity, which he already has defines as his “biggest fear.” His dream was to challenge the stereotyping of the black and define his own life as an African-American male, but the road to get there has not been easy, thinking of him choosing his nerd status instead of the hooker life in the ghetto. Anderson²³¹ states that it is easier for the middle class to role switch (and therefore integrate into a more hybrid identity), compared to a street family living in the ghetto. This story has a double function, it underlines Anderson’s statement through watching the role switch-awareness which has developed within De Shawn’s through his journey from living a street-life in the ghetto to living a decent middle-class life, as well as it function as a testimony with a clear message; that you don’t have to be born into a middle-class family to achieve the role-

²³¹ Elijah Anderson. Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania

switching codes which I believe can appear when you are able to come to peace with your collective self, and move on facing the “Other”, including an oppressive dominant majority. For De Shawn education opened up a new gate into society.

On the other hand, it can be a long and challenging road in terms of hard work and discipline, and even when you have reached the goal, I assume that racial discrimination based on accurate group generalizations will nevertheless be unfair to particular members of the group. There are certain stigmas no matter of class division which always will follow you: the color of your skin, and its consequences based on stigmatization. This confirms the double consciousness showing the mobility between modern subjectivity yet the shared internal essence based on the shared African-American negative history and the commitment which follows with it both in terms of self-identification and forced stigmatized labeling from the majority.

4.3.3 Black identity through a stereotyped African-American culture

In the midst of this complexity of class differences and identities, I want to recall the question raised earlier in this thesis: what is African-American culture? Through my informants focus on the subject, I aim to underline what they find important on this matter. According to my informant, Khalid, is “what we know as African-American culture typically, not African-American culture. Because what is promoted as African-American culture is a lot of basketball, entertainment, stand up comedians, jazz musicians, clowns gestures and entertainers”. He means this is just a very small part of it, and points out to the fact “that you can’t even distinguish between white and black culture, because through judging people in cultures like that, it would appear as large generalizations.”

It also underlines how African-Americans have been limited to still serve the white dominant society by moving from the slave status to entertainers. According to Gilroy “there is an imminent challenge to the commodity form to which black expressive culture is reduced in order to be sold.”²³² It is a challenge that is practiced rather than simply talked or sung about. Talk-

²³² Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 100.

ing about African-American culture being reduced in order to be sold, my informant Ike shared with me:

White people feel less threaten by entertainers, but they love football players. I lived in Minneapolis with a great amount of Scandinavians. Those guys said what they had to say without saying it; “my daughter is dating a black guy, in he is not even a “Packer”. What he said in defensive. He said it right around the corner, guess what; it didn` t change the way he related to me.

His experience confirms the fact that black culture is acceptable as long as it remains from a certain distance- as long as we do not have to deal with it in our private sphere. I once told my African-American friend, that I knew a great number of white American fellows who had African-American friends. He responded with asking me; “well I guess you are referring to the professional job sphere? How many of them have a friendship which goes deeper into the private casual zone?” I had to admit, that it was not many I knew of. The dominant power in society therefore limits the associations with the African-American culture from being nothing more than what serves us based on our superficial materialistic, business or social needs. If this is still the development it hinders the African- American culture based on its collective essence from developing into a more diverse association. It also brings Gullestad`s theories into the light, which underlines the importance of focusing on the power to categorize and define others. Through categorizing a cultural group based on a certain oneness, its identity may remain stuck in negative stereotyping, while the gap between “us and “they” might increase into a reversing development in the supposedly “melt-pot society”.

4.3.4 Black Identity-The criminalized “Other?”

Tee shared about how prison did something to him, in a way that he had to become a man instantly. He told about the eternal punishment of being an ex-inmate. “Once you realize it is not over; the prison system still reminds, because it is so hard, at least in Indiana.” He shared the fact that on the driver license there have to be a special symbol for people who have been on probation or have a felony. It is automatically seen when the person show their driving license. Even though he is proclaimed innocent, will his original felony showing 20 years and “attempted murder” be marked on his ID.

Like he said, “it is automatically putting somebody alert.” These factors which Tee found extremely discriminating, did he frame as “something that is shaping who you are”. Tee is not alone, being released living with a felony upon his name. According to the book: “Color of Justice”²³³; racial minorities are arrested far more often than whites. African Americans are only 13 % of the population, but in 1996 they represented 49, 4 % of all arrests.²³⁴ Even more alarming, the incarceration rate for African-American men is seven times the rate for white men (3,250 per 100,000 compared with 461 per 100,000).²³⁵ It is accused for being a classic cliché, but due to statistics more young black males are in prison than in college.²³⁶ Black studies found that African- Americans were arrested more often than whites, mainly because they were more often disrespectful to police officers. This phenomenon seems to represent a circle in racial discrimination. Because of the broader patterns of racial inequality in U.S society, young African- American men might have more negative attitude towards the police; expressing their hostility towards police officers results in higher arrest rates, which only heightens their feelings of alienation and hostility.²³⁷

Ike, one of my informants who has worked in the prison system for many years, shared his daily fear of being stopped by the police (despite the fact that he has never had a criminal record himself): “When I drive down the street and a police officer pull me over I go from top to bottom; am I gonna get killed or harassed....” Stopping, questioning, and frisking people on the street is another humiliating source of police-community tensions,²³⁸ which is well known within the black communities. Also during my stay in Indianapolis through conversations with African-Americans, and personal experiences in the black community, I have been witnessing harsh and discriminating treatment of African-American males as well as observing the fear that exists of being caught innocently. While talking about alienation, Ike first hesitated whether he should tell me or not, but in the end he carefully stated: “I met this guy in Millovokei. He travels all over the world. He is a Muslim, and he is so cool. I don’t know how to explain it. When you meet a white man you haven’t met before, you are kind of reserved because you never know what will happen.”

²³³ Walker, Spohn and De Lone. *The Color of Justice: Race, Ethnicity and Crime in America*. 2nd ed. (New York: Wadsworth, 2002), 1.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²³⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prisoners in 1997*(Washington, D.C: U.S Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 9

²³⁶ D’Souza, *Racism*, 7.

²³⁷ Walker, Spohn and De Lone. *The Color of Justice: Race, Ethnicity and Crime in America*), 100.

²³⁸ Walker, Cassia and DeLone. *Racism*, 102.

Even Ike, an innocent man belonging to a decent middle class family, still fears the white man, based on his own experiences with the society authorities at large. Once you have become an innocent victim based on skin-color, the fear seems to be rooted both consciously and unconsciously in a way that makes you trusting nobody, especially those with a white color. Based on experiences he knows that his skin-color within the America society force him to be stereotyped as a criminalized “other” and even if it scares him, most of all it saddens him.

Summary:

We have seen in the light of Halls two models of identities; essential identity versus discontinues identity, how the idea of biological race theory have set the African-American apart from the dominant white group. It has also stigmatized the African-Americans into an undifferentiated oneness upon negative generalizations, and stereotyping. The “other” has become racialized. Black identity is based on biological genetics, ethnical interpretation of blackness or a cultural understanding of blackness. This also shows the complexity and mobility of the African- American identity, also showing the potential of Hall’s model of “discontinues identity.” Despite of this presentation of complexity of identity, there still seem to be an experience of a stuckness where the hegemonic power limits the African-American groups from developing freely in a democratic society, but rather stereotype them based on biological genetics. As time has moved on in the political sphere, and it’s not political correct with hierarchies based on genetics, another method is applied for legitimating discrimination of African-American; the cultural differences has become de-reunifying.

There is a tendency when black culture is being reduced in order to be sold. Another point that has been made in this chapter, is that Black culture is acceptable as it does not come to close. Black culture seem to suffer, if the dominant power take it for granted that a cultural group are based on a certain oneness. By stereotyping and limiting them in one category, their identity might remain stuck in a brutal history and negative stereotyping, while the gap between “us” and “them” will increase into a reversing developing in the supposedly melting pot. We have seen that black males are arrested far more often than whites. Through research and statistics it has been suggested that in many cases ‘black behavior’ is interpreted as disrespectful behavior with reference to police officers- leading to unnecessary conflicts and

arrests. 50% of all the incarcerated prisoners are also African-American. I believe such stereotyping easily can turn into an evil circle and a negative attitude towards the police will easily develop. Having these negative statistics in mind, expressing their hostility towards the police might results in a higher arrest rate which again heightens their feeling of alienation and hostility. My interviewees expressed their daily fear of getting pulled over in the traffic by the police, not knowing if they would end up harassed or killed. Internalizing whether consciously or unconsciously stereotyped attitude towards African-Americans, in several of the societies institutions seem to be a common pattern in many of the societies` major institutions. Similar pattern, seem to find place in the educational school system. African-American are two times more likely to be referred to special education under “emotionally disturbed” than white counterpart (is this only stereotyping, or is it that slum people, black and white, are prone to need extra help in school, and it just happens to be more black children in the slum). Due to a Harvard study analyzing the special phenomenon, the results showed that teachers who are not trained is social differences recognizes social patterns as differences, and minority children are often perceived as low in achievement aggressive and in need for special education. The results, I believe, might end up in the same evil circle as the section for criminology. The already given identity of alienation and failure as a “one-ness” category, from the hegemonic power become permanent markers which get absorbed, and might results in a hostile attitude towards the system.

5.0 BLACK IDENTITY VERSUS A U.S NATIONAL IDENTITY

In this chapter my aim is to investigate to what extent black identity is rooted in American national identity. I start with a presentation of relevant theories covering perspectives of the diaspora and national identity discussion. Important scholars are Anthony D. Smith, Paul Gilroy, and Avtar Brah. I will analyze themes that my interviewees have viewed as being highly relevant to their lives and the field- “living in a Diaspora nation within a nation”.

The empirical section comprises the following themes to be discussed: integration versus nationalism, which may offer important aspects in order to understand why people convert to Islam through Black Nationalism. Since Black Nationalism`s essence consist of history, I aim to address nationalism with a particular focus on black nationalism as a filter for integration. Presenting Black Nationalism through the NOI, I attempt to focus on specific themes through the NOI, which my interviewees in Indianapolis found appealing to their identity formation and sense of meaningful life. In that section I will let my interviewees describe their conversion experience and present current statistics supported by historical context, which I believe will be help us to understand why people converts from a American National Identity to Black Nationalism. In the end I will focus on 9/11 and the tension between the immigrant Muslims and African-American Muslims.

5.1 Diaspora and National identity:

The floating between the sea and the port.

Studies of ethnic survivalism, show how ethnic communities can and have survived over long periods without political autonomy, without a homeland of their own, through social and psychological factors compensating for these absences. With this in mind, Anthony Smith underlines the importance to pay more attention to the subjective elements in ethnic survival, such as ethnic memories, values, symbols, myths and traditions. He also stresses that ethnic community members must be made to feel that their historical community is unique, and that the community has a sacred duty to extend its cultural values to outsiders.²³⁹ An ethnies is defined

²³⁹ Anthony Smith in Hutchinson and Smith, *Ethnicity*, (Oxford/New York: Oxford University press, 1996), 189.

as "a named population sharing a collective proper name, a presumed common ancestry, shared historical memories, elements of common culture and a link with a "homeland" and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members."²⁴⁰

According to sociologist Anthony Smith:²⁴¹

In the modern rational state there was no room for an ethnic autonomy that conflicted with the requirement for all citizens to integrate into the new national state. The new ideologies of political nationalism required all the members of a "nation state" to be united and homogenous, and this produced quite new conflicts in most states which were, after all, composed of several ethnic communities.²⁴²

Smith argues that nationalism "does not require that members of a "nation" should all be alike, only that they should feel an intense bond of solidarity to the nation and other members of their nation. A sense of nationalism can inhabit and be produced from different ideologies that may exist in a given locale. Kinship, religion and belief systems are examples on important factors that contribute towards nationalism. Smith describes "ethnics" as the ethnic groups that form the background of modern nations. A nation-state can therefore be defined as "a state claiming to be a nation," while a nation, can be defined as "a named population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for its members."²⁴³

However, for African-Americans these assimilation requirements into the American culture, seemed nearly impossible compared to any other ethnical group.

The religious historian Paul Gilroy writes that earlier on in the history:

In assessing the power of roots and rootedness to ground identity, we encountered invocations of organically that forged an uncomfortable connection between the warring domains of nature and culture. This meant that nation and citizenship appeared to be natural rather than a social phenomena - spontaneous expressions of a distinctiveness that was palpable in deep inter harmony between people and their dwelling places.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Hutchinson and Smith. *Ethnicity*, 30.

²⁴¹ Anthony D. Smith. Born in 1933. Professor of Nationalism and Ethnicity at the London School of Economics.

²⁴² McNeill (1986) in Hutchinson and Smith. *Ethnicity*, 11.

²⁴³ Hutchinson and Smith. *Ethnicity*, 6.

²⁴⁴ Paul Gilroy. *Against Race. Imaging political culture beyond the color line* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: First Harvard University Press, 2001), 125.

In that aspect the term diaspora is a useful means to reassess the idea of an essential and absolute identity, precisely because it is unable to coexist with nationalist and racialized thinking.²⁴⁵ According to Brah:

The idea of the term Diaspora which transcoded from its biblical sources and often derived from the Jewish traditions in which it is primarily articulated, proved very useful to black thinkers as they struggled to comprehend the dynamics of identity and belonging constituted between the poles of geography and genealogy. The word “diaspora” derives from the Greek *dia*, “through” and *sperein* “to scatter.”²⁴⁶

Gilroy finds diaspora to be an especially valuable idea because it points towards a more widely sense of culture than the characteristic notions of rootedness. He argues for the importance of diaspora as an alternative to the metaphysics of “race,” nation, and bounded culture coded into the body.” He further underlines:

diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location and consciousness. It destroys the naïve invocation of common memory as the basis of particularity in a similar fashion by drawing attention to the contingent political dynamics of commemoration.²⁴⁷

According to him this makes “the spatialization of identity problematic and interrupts the ontologization of place.”²⁴⁸ Which further not just limit diaspora from being a word of movement, but rather a sign where push factors are a dominant influence. Gilroy argues how this urgency makes diaspora to becoming something more than just a trendy synonym for nomadism.²⁴⁹

Taking Gilroy’s approach into consideration, the importance of emphasizing on the diaspora identity becomes even more relevant for African-Americans, who might find it challenging, yet necessary to differentiate from the American National Identity. The supposedly privileges and principles attached to the national identity appear distant and unrealistic, and a search for an alternative route still seem to be preferred. The American historian of African- American

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 122.

²⁴⁷ Gilroy. *Against race*, 123.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 123.

religion, Albert Raboteau, describes: “The appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people.” As being an African- American ethnic, lacking political authority within their own nation throughout the history, black leaders seem to have drawn on the power of the Old Testament patriarchy to cement their own political authority.²⁵⁰

An alternative approach, the American anthropologist²⁵¹ Melville Herskovits,²⁵² argued that African diaspora in America is characterized by a syncretistic fusion of disparate cultures based on black Diaspora of North and South America, the Caribbean and West Africa, into contemporary practices and beliefs.²⁵³

Herskovits` discoveries argued for a unique Black Diaspora, which also included a unique mixture between African and Western elements in the process of identity construction. In line with this reflection, Brah is questioning: “When does the location become home? What is the difference between feeling at home and taking claim to a place as one`s own?” He further argues that it is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home.²⁵⁴ Historically, there were two epic tragedies of the early twentieth century which would impact the whole search for a new self; The Great Migration (1914-19) and the Great Depression (1929-45). Social Anthropologist, Robert Dannin, underlines how these two periods of suffering for African Americans have impacted the social structure of their culture. The Great Migration took place when African- Americans were forced leaving the South due to discriminating living conditions, on a journey towards a better life in the urban North. Some years later, people died on the streets, victimized of what the American sociologist, Singh refers to as “a mysterious force called the economy.” He describes the condition during the Great Depression as cruel-that even the religious beliefs were unable of explaining the gruesome reality.²⁵⁵ African-Americans were poor, excluded by racism from political power and had more or less given up. Many of the people who had migrated were in need for a support system, and as a response, several religious organizations and sects with an emphasize on social self help got established. This is when the

²⁵⁰ Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1993), 207.

²⁵¹ Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 327

²⁵² b. Sept 10th, 1895- d. Feb. 25th, 1963

²⁵³ Robert Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University press, 2002), 9.

²⁵⁴ Brah 1979; Cohen 1992; Bhavnani 1991; Tizzard and Phoenix 1993)

²⁵⁵ Dannin. *Black pilgrimage to Islam*, 9.

therapeutic aspect of Islam started becoming attractive; through physical displacement and eventually religious conversions, both men and women joined Islam as a way of liberating themselves from the surrounding suppressive context, (and a life of debt in the rural South). According Robert Singh, even in the 21th century, discrimination seems to control and limit African-Americans lives. Singh stresses that:

Despite over thirty years of civil right legislation and overt twenty years of affirmative action policies in both public and private education and employment, black and white Americans in the last decade of the twentieth century remained, to a conspicuously striking and alarming degree, two separate and mutually suspicious societies, unequal, hostile and apt to view the same facts and events through diametrically opposed interpretive lenses and emotive prisms.²⁵⁶

He further underlines how the NOI's problem in the U.S today, "...not is rooted in black and white Americans living in separate and unequal worlds within a nation. Rather, it is that the races in America are not yet set sufficiently apart."²⁵⁷ Where most American politicians might make an effort for greater social equality and increasing harmony between blacks and whites, the NOI (who represent the strongest black nationalistic religious sect in the U.S) rather seeks to move in opposite directions. Where many Americans wish for an increasing integration in the political, social and economic sphere, aiming to reduce the distance, Sight underlines how NOI's desires on the other hand, still wish for a complete separation of blacks and whites.²⁵⁸

5.2 Integrationism versus nationalism

According to the African- American theologian and sociologist James Cone, integrationism and nationalism represent the two broad streams of black thoughts in respond to the problem of slavery and segregation in America.²⁵⁹ Even today these two approaches seem to be relevant and applicable, reflecting people's views of life. "When blacks have been optimistic about America- believing that they could achieve full equality through moral influence and legal argument- they have been integrationists and have minimized their Black Nationalist tendencies." On the other hand, he argues, "there are Black Americans who have given up based on that "genuine equality is impossible because whites have no moral conscience or any

²⁵⁶ Robert Singh. *The Farrakhan Phenomenon: Race, Reaction and the Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 8.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁵⁹ James H. Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and American. A dream or a nightmare.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 4.

intention to apply the laws fairly, has been the seedbed of nationalism.”²⁶⁰ However, according to Cone, integrationists believe it is possible to achieve justice in the United States and to create good relations with the white community, despite the two-ness. This optimism which is based upon “the “American creed,” the tradition of freedom and democracy as articulated in the Declaration of independence and the Constitution, and is supported, they believe, by the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.”²⁶¹ He gives an example of the integrationist line of thoughts which goes like this:

If whites really believe their political and religious documents, then they know that black people should not be enslaved and segregated but rather integrated into the mainstream of the society. After all, blacks are Americans, having arrived even before the Pilgrims. They have worked the land, obeyed the laws, paid their taxes and defended America in every way. They built the nation as much as the white people did. Therefore, the integrationists argue, it is the task of African Americans leaders to prick the conscience of whites, showing the contradictions between their professed values and their actual treatment of blacks. Then whites will be embarrassed by their hypocrisy and will grant black the same freedom they themselves enjoy.²⁶²

In contrast, Cone stresses that black nationalist thinkers have rejected the American side of their identity, and affirmed the African side, saying “No, we can’t be both.” In that statement, he points to the historical motives, based on 244 years of slavery, followed by legal segregation, social degradation, political disfranchisement, and economic exploitation, meaning that blacks will never be recognized as human beings in a white society. “The national thinker will, based on these motives, conclude that as America is not for blacks and blacks can’t be for American.” He continues to argue that blacks “don’t belong with whites, that whites are killing blacks, generation after generation.”²⁶³ During Martin Luther King’s civil right movement campaign, he used a non-violent integrationist profile, versus Malcolm X’s nationalistic profile promoting separation. Despite King’s high appeal to both white and black people, with a academically theological background, he seemed to fail in appealing to the blacks citizens belonging to the low class. He was accused for mingling too much with whites and the intellectuals, not knowing the ghetto life well enough in order to identify with the real problems of discrimination due to being black. Malcolm X on the other hand, with a background from the ghettos hardship, could easily relate to the brutality talking “their” language. In comparison, Barach Obama, while running for the U.S House of Representatives in the 2000 Democratic

²⁶⁰ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America*, 4.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4.

primary, against entrenched South Side congressman Bobby Rush, he seemed to face the same issues as Luther King. During the campaigns, his political rival Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther, who represented and promoted Black American nationalism said: "Barack Obama went to Harvard and became an educated fool. Barack is a person who read about the civil-rights protests and thinks he knows all about it."²⁶⁴ He was accused for being too educated and not being black enough, and eventually lost the Democratic primary run.²⁶⁵

5.3 Integration through converting to Black Nationalism

Ten out of my twelve interviewees came to Islam through the Nation of Islam. It is also worth mentioning that three of my interviewees had come to a stage in adult age where they had gotten into real issues with religion, and described their relationship to religion as: anti structural religion, anxiety related and anti-religious. However, NOI seemed to meet their spiritual needs, despite their hostile attitude towards religion in general.

Ike, one of my interviewees colorfully painted his conversion to NOI as "an entrance or the holding cell."²⁶⁶ He explained it metaphorically and physically as what happen to you when you first go to penitentiary²⁶⁷ "you get a new set of clothes!" Further on, he explained "that is literarily what the Nation of Islam does; it puts you in a new set of clothes, usually a suit". Danny recalled how the NOI offered him a connection with a belief system which allowed him to feel good about himself, better that he felt within Christianity.

It is worth noticing that not one single of my interviewees say they are currently members of the organization, and for many of them they just stayed in the organization for a few years before they converted to what they described as the "right Islam" referring to the Sunni Orthodox Islam. However, I will not underestimate the role NOI played in their lives. Despite

²⁶⁴ David Remnick. "The Joshua Generation: Race and the campaign of Barack Obama. (Nov 17th, 2008, New Yorker, New York. [Http://newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com)

²⁶⁵ With this example I intend to show the struggle and process towards affirmation of black identity on a broader political scale within the U.S. Barack Obama finally gained acceptance and reached his political goals, beyond his imagination. Congratulation with your presidency, Barack Hussein Obama. This historical happening in the U.S might influence the subject of "Black self-esteem" (and the social issues attached to it), in a positive way in terms of human rights and integration. As an African-American political role-model, he might functions as an alternative to religious filters (such as NOI, Mainstream Islam and the Christian Church) towards integration in the U.S society.

²⁶⁷ Penitentiary-meaning a correctional institution for those convicted of major crimes. Definition available at: [www. http://audioenglish.net](http://audioenglish.net)

their current disagreement with certain ideas of the NOI, the sect once had a strong impact on my interviewees, and it seemed like the NOI became a necessary gateway for them in order to find the “peace” they had been longing for, and in order to move on to the final destination; the Sunni Orthodox Islam. In my empirical material from my interviews, there seem to be four aspects (within the NOI) that particularly attracted my interviewees, powerfully enough for them to convert to what they viewed as the “lost origin” (Sunni Orthodox Islam). The NOI explained to their followers about the roots and history of the black community. Secondly, they created the “do it for yourself movement” where they encouraged blacks to start their own businesses, independent from whites, and encouraged them to cooperate with each other creating a micro nation within the nation as a response to the oppression from the dominating macro system (including even the health system). Third: they focused upon the family, where the NOI strongly encouraged a traditional patriarchal family-household, with emphasis on the man as the head of the household. Fourth, several of my interviewees actually describe NOI as a rehabilitating system. In the section which follow, I attempt to analyze my interviewees’ statements relating to these aspects, based on the theories mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

5.4 History and identity

Lorraine, shared how big impact the historical element had on her conversion. “Cause, if you don’t know where you come from, we know how it is like to be disconnected from your past, and you look for who you are out there in the society. And it was not a comforting feeling for me, and that is why I really begun to researching studies. I didn’t know this!”

She shared how she through studying African-American history, got introduced to a historical reality which influenced her identity formation, giving her “something to lean on.” According to Albert J. Raboteau, have black people and their cultures in general, remained absent from courses in American history and American religion down to the 1960s. It was not before civil right activism for black power and pride (white and black) started to demand courses in African- American history and culture that administrations and faculties at schools started to respond. Raboteau stresses: “if the history of religion in American was the subject, then it needed to include the religious life of all the peoples who made up for American, not just the

religion of white Protestant males.”²⁶⁸ While asking David about how Islam connected with the African-American culture, he answered: “the connections are Louis Farrakhan, Noble Ali and Marcus Garvey who earlier presented the same idea about Black Nationalism already just 50/60 years after slavery.” He mentioned these three “figured heads” claiming that they knew the historical facts that many of the African men and woman who were made slaves in America, came from Islamic societies. “They came to believe that Islam was still part of their make-up, still part of their background and still in ‘their genetic codes’. They also believed that they should bring people back to Islam, reconnecting them with their Islamic past”. These particular factors are what David found to be the strongest connection to Islam, and that is also how Islam first appealed to the majority of my interviewees.

Roboteau underlined how the ignorance of African-American`s presence in the dominant cultures, also distorted the role of African-American in the nation`s past. He point to how they “did not appear as actors in the national drama, but as victims of the problem.” However, in this setting African-Americans were according to Raboteau, “invisible and denied any past.”²⁶⁹ In this context, Black Nationalistic organizations promoting the ignored “unknown” African- American history, often mixed with religious myths- seemed to have a strong rehabilitating function, especially in the time era before African-American history was officially accepted as a part of the American national history.

5.5 The do it for yourself movement

Due to their conversion, many of my interviewees got attracted to the “do it for yourself concept” of Nation of Islam. In this section I will put the concept under the loupe and take a look at how this specific Muslim sect impacted their life to the extent that they would sacrifice jobs, ideologies, world-view, daily life activities and former family-structure. According to Robert Dannin: “the conversion narratives can rejuvenate a popular imagination in the guise of a subjectivity that is neither transcendental nor romantic yet is plainly therapeutic” In these terms, he continues:

²⁶⁸ Ibid.,325.

²⁶⁹ Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion. The Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University press, 1994), 324.

conversion relates to psychology, because the narrative of the Islamic conversion is a ritual exorcism of the old time that purifies by exposing a person's sin to the acid light of family and community. Its inward trajectory confronts the repressed trauma exclusive to African-American history; the very distortion of memory itself during slavery, the destruction of extended genealogy, enforced belief systems and modes of thought, intra-ethnic ambivalence and conflict, misrecognition and lack of access to scripture and truth.²⁷⁰

U.S is still often considered as one nation.²⁷¹ Having their history excluded from the U.S nation's history, African-Americans were fighting for their dignity, rights, and to be seen as a whole ethnic people with integrity and strength, as a part of the American Nation. Raboteau underlines how this kind of exclusion might deny full humanity, based on the fact that history functions as a form for self-identification. Conversely, he points out, "to ignore the history of another people whose fate has been intimately bound up with yours own it so forgo self understanding."²⁷²

Ike shared with me the NOI's ability to heal...: "For 8 years this guy hang out at 19 and Broadway [a ghetto area], two years after you see this clean boy in the same corner where he used to drink liquor, and he is greeting you with "As Salamu_Alaykum."²⁷³ With this example, he aimed to show that there also is hope for recovery, a development towards a complete personal healing, a process away from inferiority to dignity as black minority, through the NOI.

Talking about what appealed within the NOI, Aisha shared her story about her husband's radical change while getting introduced to the organization:

When he accepted Islam, I saw a totally changed person, he was a marketing manager in a pharmaceutical company, in that time in the 60'es and in the early 70'es, is the time when affirmative action began and black were employed into businesses, organizations, before you had a degree. For instance Neel Johnsen, who was working as a chauffeur had a degree, he was a black man, but he was a chauffeur for the business, the owner, because at that certain time, in the 60'es and the late 50'es, they didn't have blacks in higher positions. It didn't matter what kind of education you had. At that time my husband was an advertising manager, when he accepted Islam. He, after about a year, quit his job; keep in mind; "do for yourself!"

²⁷⁰ Dannin. *Black pilgrimage to Islam*, 9.

²⁷¹ See: Smith. *Ethnicity*, 6.

²⁷² Ibid, 325.

²⁷³ Definition available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As-Salamu_Alaykum

Aisha shared how people in the surrounding village, a little predominately “white” city, were surprised, because her husband had this prestigious position as an advertising manager, which was very difficult for a black man to obtain. They questioned how he could just quit his job like that. From their view they obviously thought that he was extremely lucky to get this job, and he shocked the surrounding neighborhood who could not believe what he was doing.

Do for yourself, which meant that he was selling fish, earrings... it is funny now, when you think about it. It was all about doing for yourself; you don't need the white men, you can do it! It was radical”. Yes, I always believed in him, when I saw he was about making a better life, he was not longer drinking with the guys, he was coming home after work, it was all about doing for his family, and I respected that. Although we had very little money, I respected the man he was for taking stands in what he believed and it made sense for me.

Elijah Mohammad the establisher of the NOI, aimed to create a black micro nation within the American Nation. He had a dream to restore and rebuild the black American self, not just in terms of an internal based concept, but as a holistic approach including the economical and political sphere surrounding the whole being, yet participating in the U.S Nation.²⁷⁴ He proclaimed hard work, savings, and the increase of wealth as religio-national obligations, and during the late 1950s and early 1960s he publicized success stories of entrepreneurial initiative which grew out of the membership of the NOI. The ignorance of whites were meant to give ghetto blacks confidence to compete with whites economically. Elijah's Economic Blue Print for the Black Man invoked “communalism” rather than private gain at the expense of their brothers: true Muslims could never boycott the businesses of their Muslim or black brothers: “a bowl of soups should be shared in half between two black brothers; the blacks should work as hard in a collective manner as the white “devils” did for their own private advantage.” Members of “Black Muslim” temples would be required to give one tenth of their weekly of yearly earnings to the new Nation which was working for the collective welfare. The supportive, yet authoritarian philosophy under the NOI seemed to appeal to the rather underpaid African Americans.²⁷⁵ In line with this, the NOI tried to make a separate nationalist banking system to serve the financial needs of African-Americans, many excluded from the mainstream banking system.²⁷⁶ The Muslims` drive to become businessmen developed alongside with the breakup of the Christian-led Civil Right movement; by the mid`-seventies, the Muslim attempt to construct a black cooperative capitalist economy had been sufficiently success-

²⁷⁴ Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 51.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,51.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*,51.

ful, which further gave them respect among middle class blacks and intellectuals. The broad specter of people they managed to reach was unique particular for the NOI.

When Wallace D. Muhammad, became the chief Imam of the movement, he had a better knowledge of Arabic and of Orthodox Islam than his father. He further proclaimed “that Muhammad of Arabia was God’s last and culminating prophet to humanity.” Wallace also ended the racial rejection of whites by his father; White and Black Muslim were now equals. He reconstructed his father’s vision to establish a black collectivist private enterprise able to give African-Americans autonomy from Euro-Americans. Yet, his followers have always kept up a discreet drive to build and expand a separate economic route that maintains blacks emphasizing on the importance of the quasi-nationality and the micro-nation. On the other hand he encouraged his people to see themselves as American citizens and grasp every opportunity offered by the American system.²⁷⁷

Another interviewee, David, remembered how he got introduced to the NOI’s “do it for yourself concept”: It was back in 74/75 and David started getting aware of the NOI. At this time there were no mosques in Indianapolis, but he discovered that there were “brothers” meeting in the homes around the city. He described how the Nation of Islam was in the public places; “they were all over the place in the neighborhood; they for example passed every day selling cans of sardines or selling newspaper; “*Muhammad speaks*””.

When you heard them you heard a whole way of life, they were in the public and in your face, so you saw them, you heard them and they were on the radio. You know, you could see them on TV and you could go around the corner and buy their paper and go home and read it every, or every two weeks. So for me and many others, Nation –wide, they were the voice. They had a black version of Islam very much.

Through the “do it for yourself movement” with the NOI, Islam became the black man’s religion where they suddenly, as my interviewee Ike recalled, “had gotten ownership versus a status of submission”.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.,48.

5.5.1 Confirming Black identity through name changing rituals

Ike underlined the importance of NOI concept; “Do for yourself” and recalled that there was a constant frame for this work; “do for yourself,” which just not included the economical area, but it also included a name change. Through this name change ceremony, your personal God, Allah together with you, had to give everything back to the white man, including the English name which is associated with the slave-master. This cleansing process symbolized that the individual were not the white man`s property, but its own. On the other hand, David pointed out how other African- Americans who did not get converted through the NOI, but instead went from one slave master to another slave master (meaning converting direct to the Sunni Orthodox Islam), did not get cleansed in the same way: “I don`t think they really grabbed their own minds. And I believe that my process, and many who followed from Elijah Mo-hammad and the Nation of Islam, still keeps in us this drive.”

All of my informants changed their names into Muslim names due to their conversion, but just 8 out of the 12 are using it as “official names” even though they use it in the public sphere. As David stated: it was a part of the “do for yourself concept.” Robert Dannin underlines that “there was multiple ways for an urban migrant to remake himself as a modern worker, but the name changing rituals, through the “do it for yourself movement”, was perhaps the most dramatic declaration of personal independence.”²⁷⁸ They communicated that, by changing their Christian names to Muslim names, they could free themselves from sources of identification with a false ancestor: the white slave master.²⁷⁹ The Jamaican born sociologist, Orlando Patterson²⁸⁰ states that “slavery is not a voluntary condition, yet morally in high failure to resist to his last breath, the slave is the person who has chosen a debated life over an honorable death.” The practice of slavery accustoms masters to dealing with human beings as commodities. According to the Indian born, American writer, Dinesh D`Souza, were the slaves in the U.S “auctioned in open markets, bred and sometimes branded like cattle, wagered in card and dice games, presented as gifts as social events, and deeded to others in wills.” Through this way of treatment, the masters treated the slaves as their psychological and social needs did not exist.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 9.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.,9.

²⁸⁰ Orlando Petterson. b.1940.

²⁸¹ D`Souza. *Racim*, 90.²⁸² Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 53.

In the past almost all slaves were given only a first name, which often were inappropriate and absurd names. In line with this, grown men were often addressed as “boy” in order to underline their subordinate status. Having a surname or family name was unacceptable. Frequently, slaves were not even aware of their own age. With this cultural baggage through generations, and still ongoing experience of social and institutional discrimination, Muslim name rituals might even today seem to rebuild ones Black identity.

Also integrating Arabic language into the daily life was a way to restore the self from the white hegemony, and to a certain extent, it still seem to have a symbolic function. Psychologically, the daily use of “as-Salaam Alakum” as the greeting of a restored national identity could nourish cultural independence to poor ghetto blacks, setting them apart from the tongue of the white Anglo Saxon “overlords” and open the way to learning Arabic or sub-Saharan African languages. But the Arab words were also differentiating converts to Elijah’s Islam from their black neighbors in the ghettos.²⁸² It gave them an independent identity, free from any influence from the Anglo Saxon dominating language. This name-switching is a concept which my interviewees perceived as highly relevant in today’s U.S society. One could ask: Why should the need to switch names be that significant, if you were comfortable with your identity as a Black American citizen? In some ways it might be a confirmation of a still ongoing discrimination of African-Americans within the American social institution.

David pointed out the importance of awareness of the slave-ghost, the spirit of slavery, which has been passed on from generation to generation. He indicated how a process through the NOI cleanses you to the extent that when entering the Sunni Orthodox Islam, you go into it as an independent man or independent woman. That is also a part of the re- psychologizing process which takes place through the conversion. Ike described his relationship to NOI as follows:

I am very pleased that I had an opportunity to be a part of the Nation of Islam, because it cleaned me to the point that I could except and understand the real Islam and that has been the case for a great number of people in America.

He further referred to how African-American managed to show their resistance politically through the civil right movement:”they were so successful to the degree that the whites killed

²⁸² Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 53.

Martin Luther King, because of their need to still be superior, and after that it has just been a whole long struggle.” Even today, as a Sunni Orthodox Muslim, he perceives the on-going racism in America as brutal. Many of my informants when looking back at their NOI’s identity, the Black nationalistic and racist ideology, and stress it as conflicting opposite to the “right” Islam. Danny stated that it was not the Nationalistic ideology of NOI which appealed to him; he already knew what he framed as the “myth of Islam” referring to the history. It did not make sense to him, but it was what Malcolm X said about identity and dependence on the white men’s system, that appealed to him, and made him think about the surroundings: “Malcolm didn’t give too much thought about the religion. But the NOI just made you think about who you were.”

Danny underlined that his conversion, instead of being religious, was rather related to identity issues, due to him being a part of an African-American minority. However, he actually acted more hostile while being in the NOI, and asked for forgiveness for his bad aggressive mannerism. He recalled:

I was so deep into the Nation of Islam, that anybody that wanted to listen to me, I told them. Even at work. I even had a word with my security guards. He was just waiting for me to cook the story, so we could lock him up, but when I learnt about Islam proper, God blessed me with the opportunity to really see things correct, and I was able to see that I had done things wrong, and I was able to tell him, that I was wrong in the way that I represented Islam to him.

5.5.2 The rehabilitating aspect of the conversion:

The NOI’s rehab program

For some of my interviewees the cleansing and rehabilitating aspect was what appealed to them the most about Islam. The NOI is well known for its strong presence in the prisons, mainly due to their prison missionary activity. Among my interviewees I have three males who each of them have relations to the prison system in different ways: Ike has been working in the prison system nearly his entire life including high security facilities, while Charles has

been working as a prison Chaplain²⁸³ for 9 years. The last one is Tee who has been an inmate accused of “attempted murder” serving about 17 years.

Charles shared how he had his issues in the age between 19 and 22. “I realized there were a lot of pitfalls, and it was so easy to end up as a young to Islam as an alternative to drinking and all that.” He underlined how easy it is to end up in prison as a black young male. He further expressed his personal conversion as something which saved him from self-destruction, and from all the meaningless activities which he did before. That is why he still thinks Islam is so effective, because he knows that it is something that can transform human lives from destruction into something meaningful, family oriented, and build accountability in life. “Its own personal reputation became very important to you, so it saved me ... and I know that it saves other people.” Working as a Muslim prison Chaplain in jail, he is perfectly aware of the need for belonging. Even during the interview in one of many Starbuck coffee shops, ex-inmates came to our table greeting “Mr. Chaplain.” Asking him how he views the rehabilitating aspect of Islam, he gave me following reflection:

In prison you search for so much you don't know, so many people in prison, they don't have a choice and they know that they have to go. That is why it is so important in the prison-system. It can transform human lives into a meaningful existence and its own personal reputation. So many of the prisoners being in third grade they didn't have a choice, you know. This is people who don't know how it is to get up in the morning, to brush your teeth or to eat breakfast, and you know that. You meet men who have been so messed up and have never been to school. And then they end up in prison, you experience. To give these people some meaning in their life, to give him some meaning about why he was who he was, why he got into it...but also the struggle against other people and give them some more meaning in their own life!

Charles has seen how Islam has impacted the inmates coming out of prison, re-entering the society. The transformation gives a different attitude, where they now wish to be involved in the community, trying to ‘make it,’ trying to be uplifting, which he in the interview described as a very positive development. Even though Tee did not represent what Charles described as being the general prisoner, he shared one common pattern among the Muslim converts in the States: he converted to Islam when he was in prison. His conversion to Islam was a result of a long spiritual journey searching for a religion which resonated with him, while within prison: “The only thing about prison, when you study religion a lot of different organizations is asso-

²⁸³ Chaplain: “A chaplain is typically a priest, pastor, ordained deacon, rabbi, imam or other member of the clergy serving a group of people who are not organized as a mission or church, or who are unable to attend church for various reasons: such as health, confinement, or military or civil duties.” Available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

ciating with that. So Gangster Disciples were associating with Hebrewlites,²⁸⁴ the Five Percenters,²⁸⁵ and The Vice Lords,²⁸⁶ associated with the Temple of America, and Muslims is supposed to associate with Islam.”

Tee shared how this division between religion and gangs is a result of what administration does to basically continue to put down a dividing concur that would keep the masses from knowing about the religion in itself, and how it is suppose to uplift whatever religion it might be. Personally, he searched within every religion doing “count- letters” until he found Islam. While asking what the conversion did to his self-esteem while being in prison, he shared:

First and foremost prison did something to me. I had to become a man instantly. And then coming out from missing my whole twenties, to coming out in my early thirties, it wasn't an option for me going back to my mother. So, while I was in prison, I mean, all I had was a double life sentence for a crime that I didn't do. I had never been to jail or juvenile boy school or anything. So they gave me 70 years for attempted murder. And then the court system screwed me anyway, because once they reversed attempted murder, they was supposed to, but they said it was no more double jeopardy. Long story short, basically, I had a long law suit, and they didn't want to pay me, and they hold me long enough to ...politically. I should have been home after 12-14 months, after having gone through the legal processes.

Thirteen years later you give me the relief after you have broke my spirit down, and like you say, I missed my twenties and all I wanted to do is to go out. Islam gave me hope and you need hope in prison. It gave me that strength and discipline. It gave me that discipline to get up and turn my negative energy to positive energy. Islam gave me that hope that there is a God who is just, and it is gonna come a day and time when your story is gonna be heard. People do judge it as survivalism, but I believe it is external and internal; it gives you strength, inner strength! I am changing my negative energy and turn it into positive energy. I went on from getting my barber license, I went to Ball State and got my Associate degree. When I was in prison I got my Bachelor degree. When I got out, I didn't have the opportunity to continue on with that, because I didn't have the resources to go back to graduate school. Islam changed me and helped me internal and external to go through the period of my life that was bleak. It's death all around you. You don't know what is gonna trigger somebody out in everyday life.

Without hope you have nothing. Islam gave me that hope where Christianity and other forms of religion which I tried....didn't work for me. It worked because it was a working religion, and it allowed me, like I said, to channel the negative energy and do something positive with it. It also gave me focus and determination. When I get an opportunity I am a soldier in multiple ways. Making those five points a day, that is a hard thing to do; you wake up before the crack of day, to make prayer. And everybody is looking at you like you are crazy, asking: “Why do you wake up

²⁸⁴ The Hebrewlites: a group who claim to be the true Jewish group descending from the 12 tribes of Jesus.

²⁸⁵ Five Percenters: a splinter groups of the NOI, founded in 1964 by Claernce 13X. The Five Percent Nation (or “The Nation of God and Earths”) refashioned the teachings of the NOI, rejecting the notion that Fard was Allah and teaching instead that the black man was God and that his real name is ALLAH. They taught that 85% of the masses are ignorant and will never know the truth. Ten percent of the people know the truth but use it to exploit and manipulate the 85% only five percent of humanity know that truth and understand the “true divine nature of the black man who is God or Allah.” (Quoted from “*Jihads in the Hood, Race, Urban Islam and War on Terror.*”)

²⁸⁶ The Vice Lords: the Almighty Vice Lord Nation was originally formed in the late 1950s in Illinois State- and is the oldest and second largest gang gangs in Chicago. Their total membership is according to Washington research 100 000 to 130 000. Available at:[http:// www.knowgangs.com/gang_resources/vice/](http://www.knowgangs.com/gang_resources/vice/)

in the middle of the night, and it is cold outside?” Just to have that discipline. You can do that, and elide what is important; what is positive and what is not positive.

He also pointed to the need of external rituals, to physically use your energy to do something positive. Even Malcolm X converted to the NOI in prison, and prison ministry has always been an important element in the Nation's recruitment. The NOI has saved and transformed countless hard, poor, and criminal lives. The NOI gave Malcolm self-control and personal dignity and the power to help other people to gain those qualities. That transformation seems to be inseparable from the Nation's radical teachings where the power of example plays a strong role. Since the majority of my informants reflect a trend representing the African-American Muslim population in general (from the 70's), through having converted from the NOI to the “universal” Sunni Orthodox Islam, it would be natural to think that this development also would take place in prison.

Despite of this trend, statistics on conversions to Islam vary widely according to location. Alex Taylor, chaplaincy services administrator for the Florida Department of Corrections, stated that Muslims account for approximately 4 percent of the prison population in his state, with the NOI accounting for a quarter of that number. New York's Islamic prison population is around 14 percent, with an additional 4 percent of the population declaring for the Nation of Islam. In Illinois, 6.5 percent of inmates are Muslims, and only an additional 0.75 percent belongs to the Nation of Islam. In Michigan, Sunni Orthodox Islam²⁸⁷ (4 percent) and the Nation of Islam (4.5 percent) are individually outnumbered by another Islamic offshoot, the Moorish Science Temple (6.5 percent).²⁸⁸

Personally having been involved in different religious and non-religious African-American settings, outside and within prison networks, there seemed to be a certain permanent respect for the NOI, despite of disagreement of ideologies. In line with this observation, Krista Obbits, director of public relations for Prison Fellowship, says that “based on the experience of Prison Fellowship volunteers and workers, Muslims associated with the Nation of Islam account for some 70 percent of Muslims in prisons.”²⁸⁹ The clear paradox in these statistics is “not surprising”, says the American historian, Philip Jenkins.²⁹⁰ Based on a paper on Islam in prison, written for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Prof. Jenkins, underlines that incar-

²⁸⁷ Meaning: Sunni Orthodox Islam

²⁸⁸ James Patric Holding. “Faith behind the Fence. Religious Trends in U.S Prisons.” *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 6, 2004: JAP160.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University.

cerated Muslims float between groups, or declare for mainstream Islam, even though they are ideologically connected with the Nation of Islam. This makes it difficult to assess their religious affiliation. He states:

Some inmates may believe that associating with the NOI will cause them to be more closely watched by prison staff. Others may appear to be aligned with the Nation of Islam because they express admiration for Nation of Islam leaders, or support views of the racial oppression of African Americans similar to those offered by the Nation of Islam. Such inmates, however, may also reject the radical teachings of the NOI (e.g., the inferiority of the Caucasian race) and thus reject formal membership with the sect. Assessing just how many Islamic inmates are truly associated with the Nation of Islam, therefore, becomes a problematic exercise.²⁹¹

These statements of Jenkins confirm my ex-inmate interviewees' opinions and experiences within prison. It can also be applied into a broader as necessary "meaning based on the Muslim converts' statements about their journey from the NOI to Orthodox Sunni Islam. Reflecting upon how the NOI has transformed their own lives to the better in the past, my interviewees still admired the Nation, and look at the organization and its past leaders role-models" for the African American population, which still face discrimination in various ways. On the other hand, they do not want to be associated with the extreme racist discourse the organization now and then seem to be using, which also often is associated with aggressive political action. The NOI's racist and separation discourse is often viewed as political incorrect due to the time context where the general accepted focus is moving towards integration and in the theological sphere, towards the "interfaith" dialog, more than towards nationalism and segregation.

As my interviewee Tee pointed out, the line between religious sects and prison gangs often is hard to draw. Nevertheless, he underlines, it has to be drawn, and the benefit of the doubt must be given to spiritual freedom even in the context of physical restriction. "You can try to completely repress the religious lives of inmates, or restrict it to certain approved (i.e. Christian) sects. He underlined how this is likely to be ineffective without absolutely "draconian" strategies of isolation," and most probably it will deny to many inmates the power to re-make themselves. He also pointed to how a religious restriction could lead to extreme spiritual and physical responses.

²⁹¹ Faith Behind the fence. "Religious Trends in the U.S prison: News Watch column of the Christian Research." *Journal volume 27*, number 6 (2004).

Having dialoged with several ex-inmates in the U.S prison system, prison-life is all about survivalism. There are always some known trigger points, however, as Tee pointed out, “you don’t know what is going to trigger anybody”. Being a light brown/yellow African-American you had to find an alternative way for protection. Not being black enough, or being skinny, untrained and white, without any previous criminal past, the need to protect yourself from being murdered, will be important. Many times there exist no other option than searching for gang-membership which is associated with religious or “sectarian” organizations. Since religion often is linked to certain gangs within prison, inmates often go searching through the different religions through “count letters.” According to some of my interviewees, the mainstream Islam is viewed as a universal brotherhood, without any focus on the tension between races, so in that way, the Muslim brotherhood operates differently from gangs such as nationalistic groups like the Latino Kings, Ku Klux Klan, and NOI. It also follows a bonus with these kind of memberships; it can offer you what my interviewees refer to as “universal protection” versus “nationalistic protection” despite of your culture and skin-color, based on the Universal Sunni Orthodox Islam’s ideologies, which seem to be a strong positive element in an American Muslims convert’s conversion. If you attempt to stay alive, that package seems to attract inmates. My interviewee, Danny, shared how the universalistic aspect of the religion, for the first time in life taught him an anti-racist attitude which he respected and further on adopted into his lifestyle. What is said to be special for the Muslims brotherhood within the Orthodox Islam is the “multicultural universal aspect,” which does not emphasize color of the skin, as a trigger point of any kind. As a result of this, the religion offers a peace building uniting process, across race, which often is a new thought for inmates. This process might not have taken place in another setting outside prison, where the tension between races still exist, and often to a much higher degree among hardcore “ghetto” criminals living in the “hood”. This can further offer a rehabilitating aspect of anger issues towards others from a psychosociological aspect. In every aspect of the steps toward Islam, Kenny underlined that it is the hard core criminals who are the ones who walk the straightest path (meaning: be the most conservative and disciplined), they are the ones who have zeal and have the most enthusiasm in Islam. They have seen a lot, but they have to temper that zeal with knowledge. According to the American terrorism analyst, Michael Radu²⁹²: “Muslims (compared to France, where they often live in impoverished ghettos, where criminal activity is common) tend not to be in prison in the U.S because they are middle class, educated, and don’t have the pathologies of

²⁹² Michael Radu. Center on Terrorism, Counter Terrorism and Homeland Security

the European Muslims.”²⁹³ However, we also need to considerate that the high conversion rate to Islam, which might mean that African-Americans from the ghetto entering prisons in the U.S, may shift class identity after converting to Islam, in terms of dignity development, goal achievement, ethics and values, and thus change the structural frame around their lives when they re-enter the society. Therefore, after the conversion, they most likely never enter prison again. My interviewee Khalid is referring to Malcolm X as “THE” example, “coming up with an eighth grade education and then speaking to the heads of countries; Tomo Cunjary, Jomo Kenyatta, Abdu Nasser, the king of Della.” “Incredible” he commented, “coming from the hood; especially coming from extremes cults, coming from that cult to that cult; people traveling from pole to pole. It says something about the developmental process and the ability to change.”

5.5.3 The power of rituals- secular rituals versus Muslim rituals

My interviewee Tee, mentioned how the system after 13 years in prison, broke his spirit. His statement underlines a need for protection of the inner being to the same degree as the external being. The internal self- needs to be disciplined and encouraged in order to cope with the brutal surroundings. Through rituals involving the physical body with both an internal and external focus, it might offers a complete focus managing to take your negative energy into a selfless focus with an intimate focus on the Almighty Allah. The primary pillars of the five pillars within Islam, is believing that there in only one God and creator, referred to as Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger, and making the declaration of faith is called the “Shahadah.” Praying “Shahadah,” five times a day, through the pre-cleaning rituals, kneeling down on your knees facing Mecca, requires a holistic and complete focus involving cognitively and physically concentration.

Some U.S prisons offer contemplative programs for inmates and staff, which may include meditation, yoga or contemplative prayer. While these programs are sometimes secular, they are also frequently sponsored by religious organizations and interfaith groups. Such programs have an established history. In the 19th century Quaker ideas, were co-opted by Pennsylvania prisons, which had inmates meditate upon their crimes as a key component of rehabilitation.

²⁹³ Jennifer Carlile. “Islamic radicalization of Europe`s jails. Treatment of Muslim inmates varies across EU.” Available from: MSNBC.com. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com>

In the 1970s organizations such as the 'Prison Ashram Project'²⁹⁴ and the 'Syda foundation'²⁹⁵ began programs to offer meditation or yoga instruction to inmates. In later years more religious groups have begun meditation programs, such as the Prison Dharma Network²⁹⁶ in 1989. Modern meditation programs are thought to help inmates deal with the stress of confinement. One recent study has suggested that such programs help to reduce undesirable and unhealthy behaviors, like drug use, violence and risk taking. Not all prisons allow contemplative programs, leading some to use religious freedom provisions as a way to gain access to the programs. For instance, court actions recognizing Zen Buddhism as an "acceptable religion" have secured meditation programs in New York prisons.

The power of meditation rituals such as Yoga, seem to be popular for the prisoners and the prison-staff is also benefiting through experiencing order and discipline among the inmates in contrast to depression and chaos.

In addition to immigration, the state, federal and local prisons of the United States contribute to the growth of Islam in the country. According to the then Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Harley G. Lappin, not counting members of the Nation of Islam, there were 9,600 Muslim inmates in federal prisons in 2003. However, the American professor of international Communication Institute of World Politics, J. Michael Waller claims that roughly 80% of the prisoners who "find faith" while in prison, convert to Islam, and that these converts made up 17-20% (around 350,000) of the total (state and federal) prison population, in 2003.²⁹⁷ I aim to ask: Why is Islam the religion which is growing the most, while meditation programs are available almost through all other religious or secular programs within prison?

Robert Dannin, metaphorically describes Islam as a "virtual passport whose bearer may exercise the option to depart the anomie of ghetto life for destinations mapped out by the Quran or Sunna."²⁹⁸ He further comments that this is especially evident inside the maximum security prison, where "the literal interpretation of the Prophet's *hijra* functions as a ideal model for community and an alternative vision of truth and justice."²⁹⁹ Despite various ways of integra-

²⁹⁴ Prison Ashram Project. Available from: <http://www.humankindness.org>

²⁹⁵ Syda Foundation. Available from: <http://www.siddhayoga.org>

²⁹⁶ Prison Dharma Network. Available from: <http://Prisonharmanetwork.org>

²⁹⁷ Statement of Michael Waller Annenberg Professor of International Communication Institute of World Politics. 2003. Before the Subcommittee of Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security Senate Committee on the Judiciary. Available from: http://www.kyl.senate.gov/legis_center/subdocs/101403-waller1.pdf

²⁹⁸ Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 183.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

tion, Islam and its universal Umma³⁰⁰ seem to offer an opportunity not having to mirror yourself into the American society at large. Instead you can choose your own route, as an alternative to the surrounding destructive activities within prison, the ghetto, or the discrimination infiltrated in the U.S institutional system.

Alongside with social benefits and Islamic pedagogics revitalizing the prison converts, the Quran seem to become the instructional manual for counter-discipline. Its study opens new scriptural potentials and interpretative traditions and a new grammar, phonetics and vocabulary (Arabic). As a consequence, Dannin stresses, “the counterculture is not simply a ritual of distraction, but an ontological reconstruction occurring within a well-defined space, “*dar al-Islam*,” characterized by a common set of sensory values evident in smell, sight, sounds, taste and touch.”³⁰¹

As we have seen earlier in the chapter, especially through the “do for yourself movement,” Islam operates in a rehabilitating manner, presenting values through interpretations of African- American ethno history, literature and folklore. In terms of social relations, Islam teaches that those who lack the power to transfer their material conditions, need only to reflect on the ideal Quranic past to see themselves as contemporary actors in a world whose rules of social distinction are neither tangible nor fixed unless they are divine.³⁰² In this way, Dannin underlines that “Islam deals with social difference, even the distinction between freedoms and incarceration, by collapsing the past, present, and the future into a simultaneity of space and identity.”³⁰³

It also might be a myth that people convert into Islam because of social beneficial programs. According to the American sociologist Aidi Hisham, “the presence of Muslim organizations in prison has increased in the last decade as a result of the state putting back on prisoner services.” In 1988, legislation made drug offenders disqualified for Pell grants; in 1992, this was extended to include convicts sentenced to death or life-long imprisonment without parole, and in 1999, the law was extended to all remaining state and federal prisoners. In 1994, congress passed legislation excluding inmates from higher education, stating that criminals could not

³⁰⁰ Ramadan. *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*, 258. Umma: Muslim community of faith, spiritual community, uniting all Muslim men and woman throughout the world in their attachment to Islam. Singular meaning: the body. Plural meaning: the members. Example of the notion of Umma: “So we have made you one community justly balanced, so that you might be witnesses before humankind. Qur’an. 2:143

³⁰¹ Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 184.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

benefit from federal funds, despite overwhelming evidence that prison educational programs not only help maintain order in prisons, but prevent recidivism.³⁰⁴ Several governmental cut-backs on welfare contribution have affected minorities, but African-Americans in particular because of the disproportionately high incarceration rates of African-American men. The Nation of Islam provides classes, mentorship programs, study groups and “manhood” training that teach inmates respect for women, responsible sexual behavior, drug prevention, and life management skills. Mainstream American Muslim organizations also provide many services to prisoners, as regular visits to prisons by preachers who deliver books and literature, courses in other subjects, 24 hours toll-free phones and collect-calling services for inmates to call families, mentorship programs for new converts and “halfway houses” to help reintegrate Muslim inmates into society after release.³⁰⁵ Therefore is no surprise that Muslim organizations in prison are gaining popularity.

5.6 Tension between immigrant Muslims and African-American Muslims

One of the most important reasons for conversion, and what attracted the most with the Sunni Orthodox form of Islam due to the majority of my interviewees, was based on Islam`s ability to eliminate color:

I think that is an aspect that attracts African- American to Islam, it is colorblind. Growing up here in the states, you experience racism. That is what America is. America is race. The racism in American is institutional, and hidden for the world. What you have to understand about America is, not only about race, it is about the class too. That is something people don`t understand. As African Americans we see that, we see that it shouldn`t matter in terms of what your skin looks like, or how much money you make. It shouldn`t matter, that is what Islam teaches.

On the other hand, even though the Quran, followed by physical, and spiritual rituals within the religion, can operate as a influencing disciplining force, as a rehabilitating anti racial and anti-classism discourse, it might not be that easy to live as a “universal brotherhood”, as a minority within a majority nation, and also as a minority group within the Muslim brother-

³⁰⁴ Aidi Hisham. “Jihads in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror.” *Middle East Report*. Available from: http://www.merip.org/mer/mer224/224_aidi.html.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

hood. My interviewee Danny shared how his Muslim community behind him had a full diversity of different nationalities; people from Marocco, Nigeria, Niger, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea:

I don't necessary know who of them who is Muslims or who is not, because different countries are split, and some are predominately and some are not. Some are Muslims and some are Christians. The orthodox over there they think different in the way they see. Different nationalities or not, you case see like I said, separations between them being Africans and us being African Americans. Is like you know, they look down at us in a sense. Is racism there whatever, until they get to know you as a person. That happened to me in the Mosques too. And I quit going to the mosque. Sunni Orthodox Islam is universal. But it's only natural to you to gravitate towards your own kind. When you are able to break down that barrier you can see me for the right brother, or brotherhood. You can look as a nice person, until you destroy the image you have, you are not stereotyping right at the top. That is what Islam does. When you first come in, you feel that unity, and once you get in there, the hierarchies, and clicks are still in there. And that is when the problem comes.

Danny described a tension between African/Arab immigrant Muslims and African-American Muslims, which also a few other's of my interviewees mentioned, when discussing the Muslim community in the Midwestern region of the U.S. According to Marcus, there seemed to be a tension between the immigrant Muslims and the African-American Muslims based on socialism versus capitalism. In the interview he underlined how the immigrants are coming to the country in order to achieve the American Dream, which represent the white man's fortunate history. The tension is, from Tee's view, based on the Muslim immigrants attempt to operate as copies of Caucasian middle class Americans, whereas they do not pay attention to the ignored social exclusion of minority groups, discrimination, and poverty issues, but rather use money on their mosques, personal wealth, luxury buildings and try to pursue the American Dream. More generally, native born African-American Muslims are the most disillusioned segment of the U.S Muslim population. When compared with other Muslims in the U.S they are more skeptical of the view that hard work pays off, and more of them believe that Muslim immigrants in the U.S should try to remain distinct from society. They are also far less satisfied with the way things are going in the U.S. Just 13% of African-American Muslims express satisfaction with national conditions, compared with 29% of other native born Muslims, and 45% of Muslim immigrants.³⁰⁶ This statistics might reflect the dynamics and tension due to different patterns of values polarized between for instance a capitalist and socialist attitude.

³⁰⁶ Pew Forum on Religion and Public life, *Pew Research Center*, 2006:24

Talking about the tension between the Arab Muslims, and the African-American Muslims within the U.S, the tension seemed to have transferred and divided the Sunni Orthodox communities within, especially where the majority does not consist of Arab or Asian immigrants.³⁰⁷ However, the American sociologist Edward Curtis underlines the importance of Islam to be identified with all of humankind as a group. In Islam`s classical period, for example, many Muslims felt Islam to be inseparable from Arab culture. Likewise in more modern times, many African-American Muslims have viewed it as synonymous with being black. Hence, one can say for Arab Muslims that there was no tension whatsoever between being part of particular group or human being, and being Muslim; for them it was one and the same. Throughout the history, when Islam has been embraced by Muslims as a universalistic tradition, questions about the meaning of diversity and difference have emerged with special urgency, in classical Islam as well as in African-American Islam. These questions have involved a number of different issues, including variation in ritual, practice and belief as well as social justice and politics. In North American as the two American scholars in Islam Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith point out contemporary Muslims debate often focused on “how not to compromise the ideal of unity in Islam while still maintaining some degree of ethnic identity and cultural affiliation.”³⁰⁸ These approaches, also underlines my interviewees` personal experiences of alienation in the American Arab Muslim Culture both at a micro and macro plan. From a micro perspective, due to daily life experiences of alienation, involving culture and differences in style and fashion. Some of my interviewees stressed that they did not feel accepted and was being treated differently in the Arab Mosques because of their hairstyle, young age and cultural background. From a macro perspective in terms of still being associated as second hand citizens, which further leads to being treated as second hand Muslims within their own country, the Arab Mosque (by Muslim Arab and Asian immigrants), as well as the government authorities on a larger scale. The tension between the two groups is based on a variety of issues; through my interviews, my interviewee Markus, reacted to the way Muslim Arabs spend money on luxury and decorations of their own mosques and ignore the growing poverty surrounding the mosques, both in the inner city and more rural areas where mosques are build. For example the world famous Mosque in Plainfield Indiana is surrounded by poor trailer parks of what is considered as white trash. The ghettos, which al-

³⁰⁷ African version of Islam: Elijah Muhammad broke with the NOI in 1975 and brought his followers into Sunni Orthodox Islam.

³⁰⁸ Edward E. Curtis. *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation and Difference in African American Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 12.

ready is treated as slum, where the poor in some way are left to themselves of the government authorities, hardly receiving any tax-money compared to the suburban areas. This results in a lack of social beneficial services and lack of funding for education. In the historical context of racism and racial difference these elements, produced an unstable environment for the rise of a universalistic Islam as an integrationist instrument within the black America. These given facts might indicate that it was unlikely that African-American Muslims would adopt any universalistic interpretations of Islam at all. Yet, they have done so from the very beginning of their history as Muslim converts. Curtis underlines how “African-American Islamic universalism has been a remarkable idealistic expression of the hope for human equality and dignity.”³⁰⁹ Still their attitude is to keep their status at Sunni Orthodox Muslims, despite the tension and humiliation they experience. This shows that the majority of the African-Americans wish for an integrationist approach on a broader scale. It also underlines the importance for the Arab Sunni Orthodox communities to acknowledge the African-American`s culture, and start responding to the poverty issues and disenfranchised people`s need at a local plan.

However, due to historical facts, the attraction to particularistic interpretations of Islam has been stronger during certain moments in history, especially in the civil right movement era and the time following, Muslim nationalistic movements, such as the NOI, experienced an incredible increase of members. My interviewee Khalid earlier referred to the 60, 70 and 80`es as a time when the system were “on”³¹⁰ the African-American to a much higher degree, than the time-period that followed.³¹¹ Despite Ali`s statement claiming that harassment due to racial issues has improved after the 80`es, the Million Man March in 1995, lead by the NOI leader, Louis Farrakhan, showed that there still existed a high number (a much greater number than statistics shows) of people associating with the particularistic version of Islam within the U.S. The Million Man March gathered more than 400,000 black men to come to Washington D.C. The march constituted one of the largest mass gatherings in the nation`s capital, and represented an unprecedented affirmation of collective pride by African-American males.³¹² Singh states that the march was far more symbolic than substantive in purpose. “The declared public goals of the march were multiple and varied in emphasis both between its sponsors and over time; to counter the racist stereotype if all Black American men as irresponsible, violent and lazy; to serve as a reaffirmation of the commitment of African-American males to their

³⁰⁹ Curtis, Edward E. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam. 1960-1975.*

³¹⁰ Meaning: treating them in a discriminating way.

³¹¹ ”The time period which followed” is referring to the 90`es up to today.

³¹² Singh. *The Farrakhan Phenomenon* , 62.

families and local communities.”³¹³ The participants represented various religious and class backgrounds, unifying in a common concern - black human rights! Also Christians participated, and legitimized NOI as an acceptable filter for fighting for equal rights and their dignity as blacks. However, African-American informants of mine, despite various cultural, educational and religious background, have stated: if they once again get an invitation to participate at a rally like the Million Man March, they would not hesitate, but immediately drop what they were doing and start the journey towards D.C. Even 14 years after, some of them, being successfully integrated through national and international professional carriers, they still see it as important to fight for African-American`s equal rights both from a grass-root level through afro-centric filters, to the political sphere, within the U.S.

5.6.1 Post 9/11

Discussing “9/11”, where Arab Muslims were the responsible behind that attack, my interviewees unanimously disapproved of that kind of behavior, and explained it as a dangerous action based on a different cultural context or Muslim fanaticism, in that specific manner they agree with the majority in the U.S. Tee stated:

When you become a fanatic that is what, extremely intellectual. They become so obsessed with it that they can`t really get what the verses really mean. People hardly see any positive aspect of Islam, so the media and the government really pump that element into masses who have no incarnation of what Islam is about and automatically they get terrified; like saying; this Muslim is gonna blow up something. “They are not open to hear, and automatically they assume that you are a criminal, and get violated so many ways.

Khalid was questioning whether they are trying to play God like a fool? “Do they think they are tricking God, without God knowing their intensions? Do you know that they are going to be judged by this stuff?” Even though the terrorist are highly educated, which surprised him, he believed that the problem is that they still are bound to their culture. He further recalled how he himself used to be narrow-minded, and didn`t want his mind to be open. Despite the rejection of Arab fundamentalism, ironically, Khalid himself became a victim of being accused as a potential terrorist on a trip he made with his father right after 9/11. The two of them were inside the airport praying. There was a lot of tension in the air. Because of their

³¹³ Singh. *The Farrakhan Phenomenon*, 63.

prayers, the authorities placed him and his old father behind in the plane with a FBI agent sitting next to them.

The tension between the Arab Muslim and the African-American Muslims changed direction after Sept 11th. The Muslim Arab immigrants, who wish to associate with the “white American dream,” has become a greater challenge than they could imagine. As my interviewee Khalid described it: “9/11 has created a new nigger, and that new nigger is the Arabs!” What he meant by that is that America now has a new enemy, which it chose to go after, people of Arab decent, which has consequently released some of the pressure. He meant that the discrimination of African-Americans which he framed as “the oppressive stuff” has improved compared to back to the 60, 70 and 80`es, when the institutional system always “were on them.” The dominating power has made the Arabs becoming the threat, the new “nigger.”

We say “nigger” because you are the person, that Pakistani an, that Indian, an African, who always was around you, your friends and buddies, and then 9/11 came, and they started to look at you really funny because they didn`t know your identity or whatever and they got scared. Then they tried to come over to the African Americans; Hey: what do we do guys? You are not a nigger now, go back to your buddies, who you were just hanging out with, because they want to kill, you know. They are looking at you really funny. So it has created that kind of dynamics, and has slipped the pressure off the African American community. Among African Americans; it has even caused little apprehension among them, because looking now; some of the foreign people who for example were Jordanians, looking at the like; we don`t know too much about you dude, whatever, it has *kind`a* created this sort of apprehension. But in terms of fear, these foreign elements that somebody is coming to bomb you, some guys coming get us, we are done with that. It has made some major changes; it has taken off some of the pressure.

Khalid described a very important concept in Islam which he believes is *Hdital Cotsi*, which means that the creator has said it himself. He recalled it as something along the lines of; “to know God is to know yourself.” With this metaphor he aimed to show the tension between the two groups:

You have to know yourself. And you know, people, take for example an African-American who is a heavy Arab and is into his Arabism however. He doesn`t know himself and that is why he is getting away from himself and choose something else. I am a common African American guy who really find Latino woman to be very attractive; however, I don`t think of myself as a Latino, that is just the way it is. The in productive with that is when you begin to know yourself, then you have enough self-esteem to begin to see the multiplicity in the Creator; look at cultures and see the multiplicity so you can appreciate the diversity in the oneness of the Creator (sic.) You need to diversify in order to worship. The external focus, leave it

alone, you haven't ... don't know about the internal, the second ice berg. When you are on a ship and see an ice berg, don't you know that you are just seeing 25% at most? Because the rest of it is under the water. So why not get a submarine to dig out how big it is? You know, it is the same towards people and culture. We try to look at the external, and people from the West in particular - we are more external driven.

This difference in cultural contextual baggage might also be reflected in the theology and ideology different cultural groups prioritize. Post 9/11 has increased the focus on terrorism, and on innocent dark-skin-colored people, or innocent people with supposedly wrong names not being in line with American custom, have been arrested for being potential terrorists. According to Rachel Zoll, "9/11 brought new analysis to Muslim inmates, many of whom are Black Americans. While prison chaplains of various faiths argue that Islam offers a path to rehabilitation, others say it has the potential to turn felons into terrorists." FBI Director, Robert Mueller told the Senate Intelligence Committee in February that "prisons continue to be fertile ground for extremists, who exploit both a prisoner's conversion to Islam while still in prison, as well as their socio-economic status and placement in the community upon release." Contrary to this harsh statement, in interviewees with The Associated Press, Chaplains, prison volunteers, correctional officials, inmates and former inmates insisted that there was no evidence of terrorist recruitment by Muslims in their prisons, although banned pamphlets and books sometime slips in. Chaplains described the typical inmate convert as a poor, black man upset about racism, not Middle East politics; someone who turned to Islam to cope with imprisonment. "They don't care about Osama bin Laden" said Imam Talib Abdur Rashid, who worked for years as a prison Chaplain in the New York state. "They have their own believes that have nothing to do with Sharia, the Taliban or Wahhabism, and everything to do with slavery, segregation and the history of U.S. racism."³¹⁴ These reports also support the idea that the particularistic nationalistic version of Islam (Black Islam) among African- American Muslim, still is an important instrument for encouraging hope in fighting for their rights as equal citizens within the U.S, even though belonging to the Universalist version of Islam.

³¹⁴ Zoll, Rachel: 2005. "Muslims in prison: Inmates think about racism, not terrorism, chaplains say". Article from Sunday Gazette-Mail. Article date: June 5, 2005. U.S prison becoming political religious, battleground. By the Associated Press. 06.07.05. First amendment Center. Available at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx>

5.7 The family institution

The majority of my female interviewees describe their conversion as being strongly related to family reasons. 3 of the 4 female interviewees describe their radical change in their husband's life, becoming a very strong testimony to them. None of my interviewees got converted directly through marriage; but most of my interviewees were already married when they converted, their husbands and wives needed to take a stand to the new religious ideology around their life and family institution. None of my interviewees, except for one woman who got a divorce when her husband did not convert, felt any stress related to their spouses or their own conversion. The majority of them gave each other time and space to mature in the process of reshaping a new religious identity affecting the family unit whether they were the convert or the spouse. Observing their spouses' spiritual journey, resulting in a dramatic role development towards a healthier character, impacted many family units to the degree that their partners wanted to support them, taking a role as a "team-supporter" in the family institution. All of my married interviewees' relationship, where one of the spouses had converted, except from two cases, had been followed by their spouse's conversion. Kenny and Lorraine are the exceptions. His wife is still a strong Christian, and Lorraine divorced her husband after she converted.

For Aisha it was not the NOI which appealed to her the most, but what appealed to her was the roles of the men and the women. How the man was the protector and maintainer, provider, and the head of the household; that was what resonated with her. Through questioning herself, why it resonated with her, she answered: "I was on an intact family, two parent home, when I grew up, but my father wasn't the leader of the home. My mom was." She shared how African American woman often are in charge in the home. So what resonated the most with her in the NOI was the family structure, where the man was expected to take the leading role of the family, to be the one to whom the woman looks for guidance and directions.

"I always believed in my husband, but when I saw he was about making a better life, he was no longer drinking with the guys, he was coming home after work, it was all about doing or his family, and I respected that."

About a year after, she decided to take a look at it: “Hey! I like what this man is doing, I didn’t like it at first, because he was so radical... So I decided to accept Islam, but not because of anything else than the family. That was my only reason for accepting it.”

Catherine, who described her husband as “kind’a wild,” was the one in their marriage who encouraged her husband to go to the mosque and check it out. The two of them did, and a few months later he converted. For her, it took longer time, because of “personal ill feeling issues” towards religion. But she obviously expressed her wish for her husband to convert. When my third female interviewee, Brenda, converted, her husband wanted to file for a divorce. Before the conversion she used to drink and smoke, and when she converted she threw everything in the garbage. Like she said: “I’d to sacrifice my husband, but it was all worth it! When I look back, this is the best thing I have done in my whole life. It was difficult, you loose your husband and stability and all the things you strive for, but looking back I wouldn’t have trade it for anything.” She was inspired by the first wife of prophet Muhammad, Khadidja: “Muhammad said she was the perfect woman, and that just amazed me. Because at that time in history, and that time in my life as an African-American woman, I could not just imagine a man saying that about a woman. That just hooked me in because I wanted to study her history and live the life trying to be the kind of woman she was.”

According to my interviewees the message of reconstruction of family life within the NOI really made strong impressions on my interviewees to the degree that some of them converted. The Australian historian, Dennis Walker, underlines how NOI, from the 1930 onwards, “followed in the footsteps of the Moorish movements in trying to construct two parent households of a middle WASP³¹⁵ texture in the midst of very bad conditions of social disintegration in the black ghettos.”³¹⁶ The four decades history of the Nation of Islam under Elijah stands as a unique example of an effective effort to reconstitute family life for African-Americans after long-terms devastation of it by slavery, systematic oppression and by poverty. Na`im Akbar, a quasi-post-modernist in 1982 in his sense of time-periods, cited Elijah Muhammad’s old “rather basic language” that African- Americans had to learn to respect and protect their woman and their mothers in order to make themselves a fit and recognized people on the earth.”³¹⁷ Walker further comments Dr. Akbar sharply awareness of the old NOI’s family

³¹⁵ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

³¹⁶ Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*. 270.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

structure which didn't graft together with the nuclear family structure traditionally fostered in middle America up to the breakdown of the 1970es. The NOI family-building differed from the middle WASP model, Na'im Akbar contended, in that the new two-parents households could be sustained because they had additional "protection" from the wider kins and "community" (for Fard and Elijah- the Nation).³¹⁸ In Fard's and Elijah's NOI, the local leader of the woman's organization and of the men's organization in the mosque had to authorize all selections of partners or the marriages could not take place. Although Fard's special Islam constructed patriarchal families and businesses, their enterprises were felt by many as extensions of a religious experience centered around that man-god. African- American women who run away from sexual lawlessness in ghetto streets into a sect that called for families, felt that they could not have made that break if the NOI had not "answered their prayers."³¹⁹

For the NOI, the role of gender seems to be fundamental, not only in religious- but also in historical terms for black Americans. Throughout the African- American history we have seen how the black male in the U.S due to several historical eras, starting from the arrival of the slave ships, essentially has been emasculated, and the black woman in consequence, has been forced to bear a tremendous and excessive social burden:³²⁰

As Black men we've been castrated. We feel so threatened by the high degree of intelligence, aggressiveness, and forthrightness of our woman. It only shows that we have not been afforded the opportunity under this social, economic, and political system to grow to our full potential as men. Our women have had a little more freedom to grow.³²¹

According to the Australian historian Dennis Walker, in some parts of West Africa, where the majority of the slaves came from, women had a more diverse range in economic activity, in society and politics, and marriage than in patriarchal Western- and Arab societies. In North American, the slave-owners had often intentionally separated the fathers from the mothers and children to atomize the population they exploited.³²² The forced family separation between the African American couples during slavery, seemed to destroy the nature of the family unit. While the men were working on the plantation, the women were set to work for the white man, often with sexual services. This is a complex dilemma, which seems to have followed

³¹⁸ Ibid., 270.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 271.

³²⁰ Singh. *The Farrakhan Phenomenon: Race, Reaction and Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 116.

³²¹ Ibid., 116.

³²² Walker. *Islam and the search for African-American Nationhood*, 215.

the African-American family unit as a curse through generations. According to Walker, did the low salary and sporadic employments of many African-American males, during the Great Migration, force the black woman to become the head of the family, who had to offer services for a minimum payment in order to support their latch-key children. It is said that the problems of maintaining families or developing new middle-class patriarchal families modeled upon WASP Middle America - were a result of the broken American economy. However, being restricted of money and entrepreneurial opportunities was also a side-effect, not just purely attached to economical factors, but also due to discrimination and segregation.³²³

Even today, African-Americans are statistically the last one to marry; the marriage rate for African-Americans has been dropping since the 1960s and today African-Americans have the lowest marriage rate of any racial group in the U.S. In 2001 according to the U.S Census 43,3% of black men and 41,9% of black woman in the U.S had never been married in contrast to 27,4% and 20, 7% respectively for whites.³²⁴ Patriarchal family structure, which was promoted by the NOI, become a healing tool/instrument to reconstruct the destroyed family units, which according to my informants was haunted by the slave ghost, including forced family separation, racism, and structural institutionalized discrimination. The patriarchal family structure appealed to a variety of families across class and tradition. This new concept also seemed to appeal among the woman I interviewed. Also the male interviewees seemed to have responded to the message, and have changed to be serious and responsible fathers and husbands for their children and wives. They are relational and faithful, and have gained more respect from their families and community after they converted to Islam. Even their non-Muslim family-members admire their new “Muslim selves,” because of the positive visible changes in their son`s, daughter`s and husband`s lives. Two of my male interviewees described the change which took place in the way they dealt with close family members. Hassan shared how he after having become a Muslim, managed to get in touch with his daughter. “My daughter was two years old, and after the conversion, I befriended her mother to be with her. It (the conversion) changed the way I dealt with her.” The NOI sustained these important family structures, which had been destroyed, especially the African-American man`s stolen dignity, as an extra motive of religious values, and according to my interviewees, it seemed that the missing brick in the puzzle fell in place from a broken or incomplete family structure,

³²³ Ibid., 217. ³²⁴ Washington Post Newspaper, 25 March 2006. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

³²⁴ Washington Post Newspaper, 25 March 2006. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

to a complete structure which created a safe foundation where new and healthier relations through given roles within the family found place and saved the families from falling apart.

Summary:

Taking the theories of Nationalism into consideration, according to my interviewees the exclusion of Black Identity which they felt was of such a strong art that a removal from the National American Identity felt necessary. Instead they felt a need of social and spiritual dignity and reaffirmation through the membership of another nation, named the NOI. Focusing on the diaspora identity (which often is seen as a non-national proclivity) seemed to make them search for a reversible originality combined with a physical reality where it was possible to compete in the society's different institutions as a Black person. They were longing for a U.S which would include them as equals National Citizens, on the job marked at college, and confrontations with the police. These experiences made them wanting to turn from the hostile and humiliating daily life into a Nation under Islam. In the NOI they self-image got transformed from being a minority to becoming a majority. From being alien, to becoming normal. From being excluded from the marked, to becoming in charge of their own business. Through transforming them into a sphere where a nation state's ideology for the first time seemed to transfer them into a nation state's ideology, build upon solidarity, kind ship and equality. However, anti-nationalistic and anti-white propaganda become used in the reaffirmation process of their identity. This, I believe was important for my interviewees psycho- social development; it was the pay- back time which Franz Fanon said was missing when the slave were released from slavery, and segregation. Despite of having converted to Sunni Orthodox Islam the majority of my interviewees affiliate with the Black particular version of Islam, which grew out of from the NOI. Also in the prison, this dynamic seems to exist, even though majority of the conversion is to Sunni Orthodox Islam. As we have seen, there are good arguments that the NOI is more influencing that what is registered. In this setting I believe that the hatred towards white injustice which still seem to be essential to the NOI, still have a strong emphasize on the converts. However, the tension between the Arab Muslims seemed to be rooted in cultural history and differences. The Million Man March shows the tension and communication between the universal aspect of Islam and the nostalgia of the particular black version of Islam. Even though I do not think that nether my interviewee or the causal black man wish for a own nation within a nation, do I believe it had a symbolizing value through its

mobilizing of the Black Power, despite of class and religion. I doubt the movements would have been necessary to create, if discrimination and unequal treatment of blacks had not existed. My interviewees have through their stories and statement, shown that there exist a battle of integrationists and universalists versus the separationists, depending on upon personal life experiences. These terms above also reflect to the Muslim sphere where different types of Islam exist. Although anno 2009 the integrationist attitude seem to dominate through a high rate of membership of African-American converting to Sunni Orthodox version of Islam. My interviewees have shown through their reflections and statements that they tend to glorify the NOI with a kind of nostalgia. There still appear a high respect for the NOI based on the rehabilitating models through the “do it for yourself movement” and the rehabilitating models the NOI offered resulting in a life-changing social-psychological and spiritual rehabilitation that included the whole human being. The transformation which took place is still today present even though all of my interviewees have moved on to Sunni Orthodox Islam. The tension between the Arab and the African-American Muslim also seem to be based on cultural issues and theological focus on a broader scale, indicating a similar difference as between the whites and the blacks. Even today, African-American are used to be treated as second hand citizens within their own nation. This even got worse by feelings of alienation and discrimination from newly arrived Arab Muslim immigrants, who want to be the bearer of the true Islam including the true cultural forms, political schedule and settings around Islam. Asking interviewees about the situation post 9/11, one of them stated that the Arab has become the new nigger in the US, at the same time some of the African-Americans have been arrested by the FBI for no other reason than being a practicing Muslim. Majority of my interviewees blame 9/11 as being a product of Arab culture, having absolutely nothing to do with the true Islam.

6.0 CHRISTIAN IDENTITY VERSUS SUNNI ORTHODOX IDENTITY

In this chapter I focus on the reasons why my interviewees left Christianity for their Muslim conversion to Sunni Orthodox Islam. As I have already shown, Christianity became difficult to identify with for a majority of my interviewees. In approaching this particular dilemma, I aim to focus on the motivation which lies behind their choice for leaving their Christian faith, and upbringing, for the Sunni Orthodox Islam. Which elements of the Orthodox Sunni Islam appealed to them to the degree that they converted?

After the section of introducing theories, the chapter will consist of the following subjects: “The white man’s religion” which is focusing on the establishment of the black Church, and its tension and separation from the euro-influenced white church. I will then move on to the subject: “black Identity versus universal version of Christianity,” where I am looking at the slave trades impact of the Black Church’s establishment. In the next section I’m questioning: “Christian Black Church- a female appeal?” based on its strong emphasis on worship as social activism. This, I believe will explain my next title focusing on “the power of the invisible institution” which I may have impacted the strong tradition of what I call church rituals as social action of liberation, which is the title for following section. Thereafter I aim to focus on the tension between “the particular Islam versus the universal Islam” where I will emphasize the tension and the differences between the various branches, followed by the subject: “belonging to the universal umma,” including the significance of Muslim rituals. In the end, I have chosen to focus on is the “concept of the universal Islam, and its universal historical impact on the self-esteem.” Since many of my chapters include the focus on rituals as a reason for conversion, in various ways, I include theories of rituals as an instrument to analyze its appeal and function.

According to Emile Durkheim’s description of rituals:

“Participation in certain rituals appear to reduce the sense of boundaries between participants and produce an experience of unity”³²⁵

³²⁵ Douglas, Kertzer, Spickard, and Turner in McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 203.

With this theory he is explaining how collective representations and collective rituals do link the individuals to the larger social group.

The monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, have different sets of religious rituals in different expressional ways. In the Christian Church the major sacred rituals consist of baptism and communion. The major sacred rituals in Islam consist of the five pillars of Islam, including: prayer, pilgrimage, charity, fasting and confession of faith. Rituals in Christianity are infiltrated through the life of the Christian Church, organized in yearly cycles, e.g. Easter day; Jesus resurrection, Advent, Christmas, Pentecost. The most important religious celebrations in Islam is Eid-al-Fitt, Eid-al-Adha and the month of Ramadan.³²⁶ The most common public Christian ritual is church service, whereas the most common equivalent is the Friday prayer.

In the U.S, the major Christian denominations are Protestantism,³²⁷ the denomination where majority of both white and African- Americans belong to. This was also the case for my interviewees before conversion to Islam. Herberg (1960) analyzed the relationship between religion and ethnic group identity in the 1950s, specifically asking why people in the United States tended to identify themselves in terms of one of three religious communities: Protestant, Catholic or Jews. He suggested that “European immigrants had become assimilated into the dominant U.S culture, ethnic ties superseded local(istic) ties that had characterized their self-identity and self-location in their old countries.”³²⁸ According to him, however, those ethnic differences were residual and disappearing. As assimilation proceeded even further, religious identity assumed even greater significance.

What matters most about religious identity, however, is not the actual affiliation with a particular religious group, participation in church activities or even affirmation of the group`s belief system, but rather it is religions function as a basis of self-identification and social location. Herberg underlines that “self-identification in ethnic terms was not altogether satisfactory because it implied incomplete integration into U.S life. By contrast, religion in the United States is an acceptable way for people to differentiate themselves and this becomes a way for

³²⁶ Information available from: <http://www.religionfacts.com>

³²⁷ Gilhus and Mickaelsson. *Verdens levende Religioner*. 2006

³²⁸ Herberg.1969; 6-64 in McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 199.

people to define and locate themselves in a larger society.”³²⁹ However, there is an important passing-marker: those whose religion fit the dominant society’s image of a religious community, will gain acceptance more readily than marginalized ethno-religious groups.³³⁰

In that matter, I find it relevant to present theories of official, civil or national religion with the aim to explain the tension between the dominant society’s religion, and those who don’t fit the dominant society’s image of religious communities.

Nationalism, which we have discussed in previous chapters, has often the function to tell people who they are, where they come from, and what fellowship they belong to. However, in the U.S, American nationalism has always been closely associated with the culture of civic religion. Civic religion can be defined as following: “any set of beliefs and rituals, related to the past, present, and (or future of a people (nation) which are understood in some transcendental fashion.”³³¹ According to McGuire:

Civil religion is the expression of the cohesion of the nation. It includes rituals by which members honor and celebrate significant nation event and renew their commitment to the society. Such rituals and representations are religious in that they often represent the nation-the people-as a higher and more valuable reality than mere (i.e, human) social contract and convention. They may also stir religious fervor and sentiments regarding the national collectivity.³³²

This concept appears to apply to many features of U.S religion as it is linked with America as a nation.³³³

Robert Bellah³³⁴ argues that “American civil religion is related to biblical religion, yet is distinctively American. Biblical symbolism has prominent themes (e.g. chosen people, promised land, new Jerusalem, death and rebirth. On the other hand, the civic religion is genuinely American and parallels the biblical religions, not replacing them. Civic religion and Christianity accordingly, are clearly divided in function; “civil religion is appropriate to actions in the official public sphere, and Christianity and other religions are granted full liberty in the sphere of personal piety and voluntary social action.” McGuire underlines how “this division of

³²⁹ Ibid., 199.

³³⁰ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 200.

³³¹ Hammond. (1993) in McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 202

³³² McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 202.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Robert Bellah. b.1967.

spheres is particularly important for countries such as the United States, where religious pluralism is both a valued feature of sociopolitical life and a barrier to achieving a unified perspective for decision making.”³³⁵

Despite this division, it seems that the problems African- Americans as a minority group are facing, is the national state`s institutions being based on elements of the Christian civic religion and rituals, which do not reflect the society`s ethnic diversity and thus excludes by not showing enough room for the minority citizens` history and interest. Civic religion is here used synonymously with national religion or official religion. In order to understand the U.S society`s hegemonic control attached to these terms, I find it important to give some insight in how the rise of these terms were established. McGuire describes the terms “official” and “non official” religion as an example of a divisions, which has developed as a result of a concrete historical process, in which certain social groups used their power and authority to privilege certain forms of religious practice over others. In that she is underlining how the establishing of an “official religion” by definition exclude, sometimes violently purge, a non-official “people`s religion.” She further points out that the process of establishing official religion thus generally exclude religious expressions characteristic of the poor, the woman, various minorities, indigenous people in colonized lands and other powerless groups. Despite this, non-official religion did not disappear, however, its expression may have been hidden in various time and place. Anyway it has existed alongside official religion in a number of fascinating patterns.

Non official religion is often effective in expressing dissent, precisely because it can draw upon broad cultural resources including some of the cultural resources of the official religions and use them in ways unforced and uncontrolled by the official religion. For examples, slaves who sang spirituals could draw on Judeo-Christian cultural images, such as Moses and the promised land, while expressing profound dissent against the oppression. This has also influenced much of the Black Church`s theological focus. In this matter Anthony Smiths theories of ethnical survivalism becomes relevant. Anthony Smith underlines the impact of ethnic survivalism, where he is distinguishing several patterns of ethnic persistence and different ways in which myths of election help to sustain ethnic communities. One of the patterns he is men-

³³⁵ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 202.

tioning is the “diaspora-restoration,” also attached to the myth of election to a community on the move; only this time it was moving in a reverse direction, back to the old homeland,³³⁶ meaning the return of the community to its ancestral home from which it had been exiled, making it the precondition of collective liberation. As an example he mentions how the Black Americans intended to return to Africa. He stresses the fact that the restoration of a diaspora to its ancestral home involved not merely the physical return of a people, but as the Greek educator, Adamantios Korais, realized, it also involves its “spiritual regeneration through education and political mobilization.”³³⁷

These elements of chosen-ess for survival, has also infiltrated the Black African Church`s theology and rituals, and as we have seen in previous chapters, it has also influenced the establishment of various sects of African-American Islam. Even though Sunni Orthodox Islam hardly is infiltrated by these chosen-ess elements, however, both in the Black Christian Church and the Sunni Orthodox version of Islam participation is impacted with elements of ethnical survival, psychological regeneration, and a context which is offering a social context where they can mirror themselves through a theology which do not exclude but rather confirm their dignity as African-American human beings including their roots which doesn`t limit them from being free human beings with equal rights. Even though my interviewees are claiming that the Black Christian filter for promoting this values are more passive in the Christian Church than in the Muslim community.

I find it convenient to present Gerd Baumann`s metaphor, where she presents the religions role in the “Multicultural riddle.” She point out that “the religion can serve as a translation for group conflicts. Religion can sound absolute and mark off objective and unchangeable differences between people. Religion is also after all sensitive to what is viewed as the absolute between life and death,” in other terms; the meaning and morality in life. Advocates for religious societies might appeal to their members through focusing on civil rights, and advocates for religious rights might appeal to their members through focusing on civil rights. Further, the advocates for ethical rights might translate their message through religious rights, and

³³⁶ John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. *Ethnicity* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1996), 196.

³³⁷ In Hutchingson and Smith. *Ethnicity*, 196. See the analysis of Korais in E.Kedourie, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London, 1971), Introduction. For the birth of Zionsism, see D. Vital, *The Origins of Zionism*(Oxford, 1975); for *Armenian diaspora nationalism*, see L.Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement* (Berkely, 1963)and C.Walker, *Armenia, The Survival of Nation* (London, 1980); for back-to African movement, including Garveyism, see T.Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (London, 1970).

those who promotes civil rights, might sell civil rights as “the way” to ethnic and religious society rights.³³⁸

As I have mentioned earlier, according to Hall, “struggling against existing constructions of a particular identity takes the form of condescending negative images with positive ones.” In my interviews with African-Americans, the particular given identity which they all seemed to struggle with, was the given discriminated and stereotyped “other.” How could they get their dignity back despite of the black color and the stigmas which is attached to it? Which role do the religion play? Mirroring themselves in the churches they grew up in, there were many missing bricks in order for the identity puzzle to become complete. In this manner, ethno religious rituals through non official religions might play an important significance.

6.1 The concept of universal Islam and its universal history`s impact on the self-esteem. *The Power of a universal acknowledged history*

The majority of my interviewees stressed the importance of Islam as a universal religion, in terms of belonging to a religion which liberates by not emphasizing on color. The fact that universal Islam, emphasized on a universal acknowledged history which is positive rather than a negative history limited to the slave trade history, also had a big impact upon their conversion.

Kenny had studied his history at college, but just not the history from the 1600. “Way before, I am talking about Ethiopia, and Novia, the Southern part of Egypt. The African Egyptian civilization. Studying my people from way back then, to the Afro- Egyptian history, from the universe of Timbaktu, the great king of Somali in North Africa.” Studying that part of the history he already had a sense of where his peoples` existance started, before they even became slaves. He underlined the point that a lot of people don`t understand and think that African- American came to exist just to be slaves and that is where the history starts, which he views as being wrong. “It has though me and done as great deal for my self-esteem because now I can see, not just “onga, bonga” and swords but these are a people of high developed civilization, established institution, and scholars` who were philosophers, mathematicians,

³³⁸ Gerd Baumann. *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities*. (New York/London: Routledge, 1999), 21-23.

you name it.”Khalid also underlined the importance for him knowing that his people (meaning the Muslims) had a history that was positive which he viewed as an element which moved his self-esteem tremendously and has given him a better understanding of Africans and their role of civilization. Cathrine stressed how the history of Islam connected her to her culture: “Before, all we was thought was that we came from slavery, but now it gives us a history that we were once from a great culture, civilization, so it brings a wholeness to us, and to me. So I felt it is a kinship there, which we have been missing, because it was never told that a big part of the slaves had studied or new Islam. We were Muslim, and it fits perfectly. “

According to the American Black Sociologist, Paris, Malcolm X first trip to Mecca made an enormous impact on his attitude towards racism, which later influenced his theology.

Throughout the trip his experience with the Muslims was unforgettable. In describing the flight from Cairo to Jedda he wrote: “Packed in the plane, where white, red and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair, all together brothers! All honoring the same God, Allah, all in turn giving equal honoring to each other. “³³⁹

He further stated:

Americans need to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people which in America would have been considered “white” but the “white attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all color together, irrespective of their color.”³⁴⁰

Malcolm X trip also inspired him to change his anti-white focus towards a more universal theology which contributed to the rise of Sunni Orthodox organizations and mosques in the U.S. Despite these strong emphasize on the value of the universal history, many of my interviewee also underlined the importance of not misinterpreting the universal concept of Islam with Arabism.

So when it comes to inherited religion, it doesn't allow you to, that obligated you to rehearse someone else's thinking. The Quran says that God is the Lord of the world. The Bible says that God is the Lord of Israel. God doesn't favor any race or particular nation. Except from that God made tribes and nations, so we can get to know each other, but the best of you are those who are

³³⁹ Peter J. Paris. *Black Religious Leader*. 2nd ed (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 188.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

most obedient to God, that is the best of us. So that is Islam. Muhammad speaks in Arabic, but the message is universal. When you look at Christianity, just the name of it, putting it in a name of a person. Christi for Christ. Islam didn't put it into a person. The Muslims are not one in particular. Like Jewishm comes out from Jew, that is nationalistic. Islam means to submit to God, and it is not an Arab religion. One of the biggest minorities of all the Muslims in the world today are Arabs. So if it was a minority religion, how could it be an Arab religion?

Through this reflection Ike aimed to show why he became drawn to Islam. He underlined the importance of Islam's universality in the value of its symbolism. The power in knowing that the religion is not infiltrated by "white roots", seemed to be liberating in terms of lifting up their self-esteem tremendously. He also made a point out of the importance of not drawing a parallel between Islam and Islam as an Arab religion. Some African- Americans are tired of being oppressed under someone's else's thinking, and are longing for freedom, surroundings and for a source which can influence their whole beings through a positive history and rituals which does not have to remind them about their oppressive history. Majority of my interviewees confirmed how the universal appeal impacted their conversion process.

David believed that fundamentalism is a product of a cultural context, like for example "Wahabism", which he viewed as the dominant Muslim influence today, which people are concerned about. He categorized this branch of Islam to be very strict.

There are a lot of African-American here in Indianapolis too, turning into more Arab Muslims, believing in Sharia. There are many like that, but there is also an effort among many African-Americans who have began to wake up. They begin to realize that we are just changing from one Master to another one. We are tired of the white master, the white Jesus, and we didn't really free ourselves from the church. That means being comfortable under somebody's thinking". This shows that Orthodox Islam dressed in a fundamentalist dressing code doesn't appeal to the African- American culture, which has a long tradition of multiculturalism.

According to a interviewee of mine, who is a well known Imam, there is strong growth of Wahabism through immigration in the U.S today, which also my interviewees look at as a threat to their religion. This further suggested that there are versions of Islam which does not appeal to African- Americans Muslims. My interviewees underlined the importance of having a Sunni Orthodox identity, which could respond to the historical particular element of Black Nationalism, not infiltrated literary in the religion, but in the sense a driving along on the parallel street.

6.2 Tension between particular Islam and the universal Islam

A few of my interviewees did not come to Islam through the NOI (even though having been exposed to it), but through the Sunni Orthodox Islam. Danny recalled how he knew what the difference was:

I really did, and I never was into the Nation of Islam at all. I have been through that face in my life, that black national stage, and I know that this is not the way, you know. Not that I didn't learn a lot, but I know that I can't be so self-centered, and it was not doing anything to be spiritually. It didn't look at things differently in a spiritual way, and it didn't lift me up. But from a religious standpoint it wasn't doing anything to me, spiritually, talking to brothers and at that time after college, I was going through some personal turmoil I was dealing with, and went to the Mosques sometime and my brother was giving me that copy of the Noble Quran. I read all the 114 Chapters, around 1000 pages. Reading this, constantly going to the Mosques, observing the prayers, how brothers can interact with another, and constantly reading. I absolutely love it, so doing that, I finally just decided, you know, that this speaks to me, you know. This book, this is the speech of God. This is what I've been longing for, and it answers all of my questions. You know, and there is just no doubt about it. I did a lot of reading, and a lot of personal reflections, so this was not an overnight thing, by any means. Ok? I came to Islam through Allah through personal questions, and a lot through reflecting of the world of Allah, the world of God in the Quran.

His type of conversion definitely makes a contrast to the majority of my interviewees which first "came to Islam "through the NOI's "do it for yourself movement," which according to Dannin, focused on purifying the "so called Negro" of his false ideas and bad habits, making him ready for the final phase of accepting the true Islam.³⁴¹ For him the attraction to Islam was based in the universal theological concepts, and the universal history of Islam, not the universal version including the particular black elements of the black version under Wallace D. Muhammad.

When going from particular to universal Islam, it is often said that you have to accept race without color. But does that mean that you should ignore your ethnic history and its social consequences? The first Sunni Orthodox American who went to Mecca was Wali Akram. Wali Akram is well known for always emphasizing on the universality of Islam as opposed to the nationalist or racialist doctrines. According to Dannin, "he conceived his acceptance of Islam as opposed to nationalist or racialist doctrines, and conceived his acceptance of Islam as a transition from specific to universal identity." Once he abandoned "negro-ness" he never looked back. Dannin stresses how this conversion was "an act of religious faith that allowed him maximum freedom."³⁴² Also Wallace D. Muhammad's Sunni Orthodox Islam tried to

³⁴¹ Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 46.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 115.

promote a race-less theology, through the Sunni Orthodox filter, but has many times failed in his attempt to accomplish, being unable to ignore the reality of the American racism on the daily agenda. Despite of certain blind-roads, Sunni Orthodoxy, is suppose to promote a race-less theology based on universalism, which has been of strong attraction for my interviewees. However, for some African- American it also might function as a filter for some kind of relief or escaping from the reality of their own ethnic group and the racial issues linked to it, like Wali Akram who witnessed that it allowed him maximum freedom, carrying him from the cotton field to the Arab desert. However, the majority of my interviewees, criticized this version of Islam, and framed it as going from one slave master to another. They still seemed to be dialoging with the instrument of black nationalistic ideas, fighting for equality, despite of having left any membership in any particular version of Islam, such as NOI. But does it have to be conflicting being a Sunni Orthodox Muslim, and promoting black equality? For my interviewees it is important that Islam is contextualized and reflecting the surrounding western society and they could not emphasize strongly enough, how Islam, is not an Arab religion. The Swizz professor of Philosophy and Islamic studies, Tariq Ramadan,³⁴³ is referring to Yusuf al-Qardaway which claims that westerns societies are “other societies” because the societies normal for Muslims are Muslim-majority societies.³⁴⁴ Ramadan on the other hand is disagreeing through underlining that this is no longer the case, and what were once thought of as some kind of “diaspora” does not exist any longer. There is no longer a place of origin from which Muslims are “exiled” or “distanced” and “naturalized”. He stresses the fact that converted Muslims-“Western Muslims,” should feel at home where they are.³⁴⁵ Is the reason for my interviewees` conversion based on a need for another route of meaning and construction of identity? Does it represent some sort of escapism from the American national identity? According to Ramadan, philosophically speaking; “Muslim identity responds to the question of being and as such in essential, fundamental, primal, and primordial, because it contains the justification for life itself.”³⁴⁶ He further underlines that the concept of nationality, as it is understood in the industrialized countries, is of a completely different order: “as an element of identity, it is organized from within, both a given constitution and a given space, the way in which a man or woman is related to him or her fellow-citizens and to other human

³⁴³ Tariq Ramadan. b, August 26th,1962, Geneva, Switzerland.

³⁴⁴ Tariq Ramadan. *Western Muslims and the future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2004), 53.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 93.

beings.”³⁴⁷ He further underlines how stupid it would have been to expect geographical attachment to resolve the question of being.³⁴⁸ Asking my interviewees about how they would line up the three given identities, such as American identity, African- American identity and Muslim identity in priority lines , they all lined up Muslim identity as number one, followed by African-American identity, and in the end; American identity. Why in such an order? Muslim identity seem to lift my interviewees above the limited and stereotyped categories which often is designed for them on somebody else`s term, due to their ethnicity.

6.3 Belonging to the universal Umma

In this section I aim to focus on the theological concepts behind the principles of the Universal version of Sunni Orthodox Islam, which my interviewees have pointed out as of special significance. Said in other terms, which theological aspects lies behind the concept of their Muslim identity?

The majority of my interviewees, who converted to the Sunni Orthodox version of Islam through the NOI, and the ones who converted directly, all focused on the value of the universal brotherhood, “Umma,” which did not focus on color. In that manner I find it important to put the concept of “Umma” under the loupe in order to find the particular factors which lies behind the attraction towards a Sunni Orthodox Muslim identity within the American Society. Taking into consideration the three prioritized lines of identity which I mentioned in the previous section, why would my interviewees today choose to go into a double minority role? According to Ramadan do “Muslims today in western societies, experience a great deal of tension rooted in conflicts of belonging, and if they themselves do not feel it as such, their fellow-citizens sometimes manage to connect them with another belonging to “their community” “their” brothers” from some other place, as if this attribution were one more sign that they do not really belong to the western nation.”³⁴⁹ In this quote he underlines the ongoing tension between the “us” and “them” discourses between the minority and majority, and how the majority simply is stereotyping the minorities into one category of belonging. In line with

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 86.

this reflection, in contrast to immigrant Muslims, African-Americans in the U.S have a 300 years history within their own country, which should put them in a complete different position from newly arrived immigrants. Despite the fact, African-American Muslims might indirectly experience the same form of tension, by still being treated as a second hand citizen. As a result of unequal and discriminating treatment many start the search towards a contrasting community which is representing a different foundation from the discriminating social surrounding. Through confirming their Muslim identity as the number one prioritized identity, also underlines their priorities of a collective globalized identity, meaning that they view the Muslim Umma with greater importance than their American national identity.

For Malcolm his experience of the Umma was radical and life changing, which also have been the experience for all of my interviewees. Umma can be defined as “a community of faith, spiritual community, uniting all Muslim men and woman throughout the world in their attachment to Islam.”³⁵⁰ According the Ramadan the essence of Muslim personality and community is the affirmation of the “Shahada” which makes the individual a Muslim.³⁵¹ Shahada contains a profound perception of the Creator that itself gives rise to a specific way of life for the individual, as for the society. When spoken in Arabic and with sincere intention, it is a commitment to obey God and to follow the prophet. “I bear witness that there is no god but God; I bear witness that Muhammad is the Apostle of God.” The second Pillar of Islam is Salat: a liturgical form of prayer, which is the duty of all the Muslims to observe at fixed hours. There are five prayer times, each preceded by obligatory ritual washing, morning, mid-day, mid-afternoon, sunset and night. The rituals serve to remind the Muslims in a regular and disciplined manner of their status before God as “worshipful servants.”³⁵² Around the globe all Muslims are turning towards Mecca, united in direction and intention within a human circle of worshippers. They pray quietly reciting the words of prayer from the Qur`an. At the same time, they bow their bodies in a series of ritual movements, from an initial standing position all are upon their knees with for-heads touching the floor- the whole congregation enacting as a single body its submission before the majesty of God and asking for his guidance and mercy. Each of the give sets of prayers includes the repetition of Allahu akbar (God

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 258.

³⁵¹ Ramadan. *Western Muslims and The Future of Islam*, 79, 86.

³⁵² Kerr, D. A Lion Handbook. *The world`s religion*, 323.

is greatest).³⁵³ Talking to Ike about praying, he made a comparison between the Christian prayer and Salat:

In the bible when you need something that satisfies the mind and the heart, they use the common prayer. But in Islam you pray five times as day. Once you start practicing those things... If Christianity is all this; how does Christianity ask you to worship your creator? I think the problems for those who need a logical understanding- they need rituals. Let`s go back to creation of man. Why did God create man? In order to worship God.

Through this example he aimed to show the importance of rituals as an effective instrument for intimacy with God, which he feels is lacking in the Christian Church.

Some of my interviewees stressed that compared to Islam, the Christian churches are ignoring the needs of social action towards the less fortunate in their local society (see 3.1). As a response to that, they pointed to how Islam has this social action infiltrated in their religion as a two-fold concept of giving. Prayers are linked closely up to what is the third pillar of Islam: the “zakat.” According to Kerr, this concept is often described as the pillar of social action. Kerr underlines that externally zakat is the duty of sharing one`s wealth with the poor, the needy, the debtor, the prisoner, the wayfarer - all who are less fortunate than oneself.” According to Kerr, Muslim devotional literature reflects the inwardness of zakat as “purification” of the soul. It is the mercy to the giver as much as to the recipient.³⁵⁴

The forth pillar of Islam, is according to Kerr, the fasting which involves a total abstinence from food and drink through the daylight hours of the entire month of Ramadan from early sunrise to sunset.³⁵⁵ The psychical discipline during Ramadan meant that social behavior of the whole community has to change for the duration of the month: the pace of life slows down and there is time for reflection. Kerr underlines how this is a period when social relationships are reaffirmed, reconciliations encouraged, and the solidarity of the community is expressed.

The fifth of the fundamental duties of Islamic worship is “Hajj”, the pilgrimage to Mecca and its vicinity. This is supposed to be fulfilled once in a lifetime, if it`s possible.³⁵⁶ According to

³⁵³ Ibid., 322.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 323.

³⁵⁵ Kerr. *A Lion Handbook: The World`s religions*, 323.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 323.

Ramadan, the gathering to Mecca is a great witness to the community of faith that exists among Muslims.³⁵⁷

These rituals are the foundation of the Muslim Community, which appeals to my interviewees to a strong extent. According to my interviewee David, through these rituals, Islam showed him to be a servant of God, and it helped him having a conscious mind, in a way that made him follow the Muslim rituals, like praying five times a day. It for example helped him going through Ramadan, not drinking alcohol, and brought him to a point called submission. He explained the fruits of getting to that point; “that is when you begin to learn the religion, learn about life. In Islam me holding this cup is worship, every time I shout is worship, me talking to you is worship. Everything that a Muslims do, like driving a car down the streets, is serving God.”

For Khalid these rituals helped him keeping his desires in check. While asking him about what he found as the significant differences in the framework of the religions, he responded with saying that Christianity it is almost like the backbone is taken away.

You can do it if you want to do it! No way! When the creator says; do it! You have the fundamental right to do it. If you don't do it, that is just bad on you. But then you have to slowly bring yourself into what we know as the submission to his will. You have to slowly begin to submit your will of this. So Christianity is sort of lacking that un-limbo.

Khalid described human beings as creatures of habit, and meant that rituals are put there to make our habit change and give us a meaningful life. He found that Western influenced Christianity had not stuck to the rituals as much as Islam, an element which he missed while still being active in the Christian Church:

Religions have been compromised into Christianity, and that has driven me to Islam. You know I have gotten very big desires, and Islam is that kind of religion that can keep those desired in check. Christianity, western Christianity is not a religion that can keep my desires in check, because if I only had to go to church on Sunday, well good I got six days to cut up, and make a whole jadajadajadajada ...no way” That can't be! As you know, we are creature of habit! And this is my drive with discipline. If we are creature of habit, and we are; then these systems, or these rituals if you will, which are set up to make your habit change, its more meaningful life it they are meant to do that, that they must be easted up to, and I think Christianity as in Islam, haven't been stuck to it as much. Christianity in the Eastern Church, you see that the rituals are much more towards symbols.

³⁵⁷ Ramadan. *Western Muslims the Future of Islam*, 89.

Danny stressed how Islam and its` emphasizes on rituals, gave him hope when Christianity and other forms of religion did not. He underlined that the reason for Islam`s appeal was based on its identity as a working religion which further allowed him to channel the negative energy and do something positive with it. In the end this gave him a focus and determination.

When I get an opportunity I am a soldier in multiple of ways. Making those five points a day, is a hard thing to do. You wake up before the crack of the day, to make prayer. And everybody is looking at you like you are crazy asking: why do you wake up in the middle of the night, and it`s cold outside. You wake up to make a prayer and then you wash yourself every time you do it. Just to have that discipline, you can do that, and eliminate what is important: what is positive, and what is not positive.

Delana, one of my interviewees recalled how she first observed the rituals within Islam, and what it did to her. After she got married, she got Muslim neighbors in the military houses in the hood. She recalled how she first observed the Muslims: “I could see people going up and down, up and down – we had windows that we couldn`t have cartoons on. And they were making Zalat, and I didn`t know what it was. I asked; what are those people doing?” This observation of the ritual, further led her to talk to a Muslim preacher on the military base, who told her about Islam. The preacher started a *Jumma* at the military-base there, and she joined and accepted Islam as her religion.

In line with the power of rituals, when Aisha converted to Islam, her mother commented: “I shouldn`t had put you in the Catholic Church“. In that, she meant that if she had raised her daughter in a Baptist Church instead of a Catholic Church, she would have avoided her daughter from converting to Islam.

Through these quotations my interviewees claimed that rituals are more applicable to the need of having a structure in life and getting stability and closeness to God.

Kenny underlined these arguments, through focusing on the Dean within Islam, which he referred to as “the beauty of the system in its discipline.” He underlined the importance with its meaning as “a way of life,” compared to “religion”:

It is not like I go to Friday prayer, and I`m just a Muslims then, and do the duties. When I leave the Mosque, that is when the real test starts. We have to live it. If it doesn`t change your life, you are

not practicing it in the way you should. If it doesn't change your character, improve your character and change your behavior you are not practicing the deen you should. But hopefully a person recognizes that and you will get back to the deen, get back to the source, and the fundamentals. There is so much turmoil and chaos in most of the world because basically we will never be successful until we reach and return back to which made the early generations successful, and that is the Quran, and through the letter. That is what is gonna bring the past glory through you. That is why we are under the thumb of so many people. We have gotten away from our deen, our true deen.

One of my informants, Danny recalled how he after being introduced to the *Jumma* prayer in Islam, realized how different it was from church: "There were no organ playing, or choir singing, but they were teaching about the world of God and then you prayed, and then you had to go to work. So it was all given in real life examples." In this example he is putting the two religions Christianity and Islam in contrast to each other, where Christianity on one hand, is represented through euro-centric theological tradition, while Islam is presented through a universal traditional tradition, through emphasizing more on orthodox Muslim rituals.

These statements also confirm the importance of Durkheim's theory of "rituals underlining the significance of participation in certain rituals can to reduce the sense of boundaries between participants and produce an experience of unity."³⁵⁸ Especially the rituals through the five pillars of Islam, seem to have a uniting effect which transposes new life, personal individual dignity, and a collective dignity reflecting pride over its Muslim identity, as compared to the African- American Black Church or the stigmatized black identity.

Applying my interviewees' experiences of their new ritual life through Islam, into one of Hall's definitions of Identity construction: "struggling against existing constructions of a particular identity takes the form of condescending negative images with positive ones" shows the strong power of the rituals in a healing sense - where one, as many of my informants have pointed out, "get given a new set of clothes" which is not second hand style. Through this metaphor, for African- Americans Islam appears more appealing than Christianity, not having to struggle against the complex racial dilemmas which have been attached to the establishment of the Christian Church or Civic Religion, and thereafter caused an aggressive virus in the Christian identity, especially for African- Americans.

³⁵⁸ Douglas. 1966, 1970; Kertzer; 1988; Spickard; 1991; Turner; 1969, 1974, 1974 in McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 203.

6.4 The white man`s religion.

Lack of independence within the Church

Due to statistics done by Pew Research center conducted in 2007 due to major religious traditions in the U.S (among adults), 78,4 % consider themselves as Christians.³⁵⁹ According to statistics done to Racial and Ethnic Composition of Religious Traditions, 92% of African Americans are members of historically Black Churches compared to 6% in Evangelical Churches.³⁶⁰ My interviewees represented different congregations within the Christian Church, though the majority belonged to the Black protestant churches. However, based on these statistics, why would the majority of my interviewees still consider Christianity as the white man`s religion and as a micro-version of the national state, when the Black Church already back in 1758 managed to create their first own Baptist denomination³⁶¹? In this section I aim to respond to that question through focusing on the dynamics and tension between the Christian congregations and denomination in the U.S, in order to understand the hegemonic tension which my interviewees are struggling with, in relation to the Christian Church.

First of all, according to Melva Wilson Costen, an African-American professor of worship and music, can all African- American denominations, Protestants especially, claim heritage in the “Invisible Institution,” regardless of when and where they enter denominational history.³⁶² Costen stresses the fact that “from extant evidence, we know that the early institutional churches and congregations first of all functioned in varying degrees in the “Ethnic Community-Prophetic” model. This particular model was developed by the sociologists Harl and Anne Kusener Nelsen, meaning that “the Black Church functioned as a base for building a sense of ethnic identity and a community of interest among its members.” According to them it also “accentuates the potential of the Black Church or its minister as a prophet to a corrupt white Christian nation.”³⁶³

Some of my interviewees claim that the Black Church still is the white man`s congregation, due to the history, that is, how the African Church first got established under the authorization

³⁵⁹ Pew Research Forum on Religion and Public Life. *U.S Religious Landscape Survey*. Available from: <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Melva Wilson Cone. *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 83.

³⁶² Ibid., 36.

³⁶³ Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 11.

of the Euro-American denomination. Some of the churches are still associated with the Euro-American denomination. According to Cone, “congregations that were a part of a Euro-American denomination often attempted to follow the policy and procedures of the denomination, often discarding some of the traditional African-American folkways. Where inherited order of worship avoids references to songs other than hymns, psalms, and anthems, traditional Negro Music might be excluded.”³⁶⁴ Dialectics and tensions between Euro-American denominational styles and the reality of the lived world have always been apparent.³⁶⁵ However, I aim to question; would there be any tension and accusations at all, if African-Americans naturally could have used the Christian Church, despite of denominations(which is considered to be the civic religion), as a filter for speaking out their interests? Did the end of separation, actually give them the freedom which was promised? Is the Church like what my interviewee are accusing it to be?

In order to investigate these accusations I find it important to focus on the process towards the establishment of their own Black congregations within the Church. According to McGuire, “independent denominations are the prominent religious organizations in the African-American community, today. The historical split of these groups from their white-dominated parent denominations was neither theological nor caused by dissent over doctrinal or moral purity, it was essentially a split along lines of social caste.”³⁶⁶ But how did the African-American denominations differ from the parent denomination, and were they actually different? McGuire argues that “these congregations did not differ significantly from their white parent organizations in their belief systems or patterns of worship - but their opposition was exclusively based on the treatment of African-American members by predominately white parent organizations.”³⁶⁷ This quote confirms that the separation was based on ethnic discrimination, which further limited them from their full value as capable children of God, within the Church.

Despite of having managed to separate themselves from the parent denomination, my interviewees claimed the Black Church for being introverted and keeping their frustration within church, living with a too strong emphasize on eschatological perspectives, ignoring the real social condition. In spite of this criticism, looking back to the establishment of African-American independent denominations, they were actually quite active in abolitionism and the

³⁶⁴ Cone. *African American Christian Worship*, 89.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁶⁶ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 269.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

underground railroads, and organized numerous education- and social service projects to help escaped slaves arriving in northern cities.³⁶⁸ However, there is no doubt that the Black Church has played a strong role in the African-American culture. Lincoln is stressing “how the black church have played a more complex role and assumed more comprehensive burdens in their communities than is true of most white and ethnic churches.”³⁶⁹ He further underlines how members of black church congregations often provide informal social service network offering help to its own people.³⁷⁰ In addition to have played an important role as a social institution within church and society, it has in many ways been the mother institution and recruit ground, for a majority of pro-black cultural organizations, businesses and institutions, representing the first independent institution within the community. Despite of these positive elements of social action, Wilmore supports my interviewees` criticism, through pointing to the fact that African -American denominations and sectarian groups historically have been lacking a critical voice towards the dominant society. Lincoln is arguing that this passivity took place and was largely due to the economical suffering from the great migration. He underlines that especially during the interwar period, the church went into a conservative political position and became de-radicalized. They started to accept the American “way of life”- in terms of withdrawing themselves from political and social involvement in their communities the dominant cultural values and criteria for success, followed by a denial of black heritage and Black Nationalism.³⁷¹ He further argues that “although they are conscious of racial grievances and real social inequalities, they have not typically questioned the rest of the established cultural order”.³⁷²

Historically, through the legal segregation, African-Americans were by local and state law racially segregated from daily life in general. Despite of class, they all suffered from discrimination such as competing for jobs with waves of European immigrants, school, public transportation, voting rights.etc³⁷³ McGuire argues how the massive rural to urban migrations of African-American created new disruptions. As a result, rural churches suffered by losses of members and material support, while urban churches were overwhelmed by the needs of the huge influx of rural blacks, many of whom were uneducated, unskilled and unprepared for the

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 271.

³⁶⁹ Charles Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American experience*. (1990, University Press Durham: NC), 188.

³⁷⁰ Charles Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American experience*. (1990, University Press Durham: NC), 188.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 209.

³⁷² Wilmore. 1972:213-214 in McGuire. *Religion: The social context*, 271.

³⁷³ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 272.

difficulties of the urban ghetto. This period further marked the beginning of the greatest increase in sectarian groups, based on the double threat which the city represented to many rural immigrants: “it represented their first experiences with a nonreligious worldview and with a social situation where the norms and values of a small, tightly knit community did not hold.”³⁷⁴ The passivity which my interviewees claim the church to have due to fighting for civic and social rights might have its background in the church as an institution for survival and resistance. Even though the churches through the time of segregation built up their own churches, schools, banks, health clinics and social clubs, they did seldom engage in social activism fighting against discrimination at a political level.³⁷⁵

Despite of Martin Luther King`s promotion of civil rights during the Civil Right Movement, according to McGuire, and also underlined by other of my informants; most African-American denominational organizations at the national level were conspicuously absent from 1950s and 1960s civil right activism. This pattern might be based in the difficulties with maintaining their own organizations, and a stage of being, where activism can seem to have threaten their stability and acceptability.³⁷⁶ According to Lincoln, “prior to the civil rights movements many black church leader sometimes courted low visibility preferring a behind the scenes approach towards civil rights and economical issues. They attempted non-confrontational negotiations with the local white employers for access to jobs in hospital, school factories and departments stores for black votes.”³⁷⁷ This was in line with the rhetoric consisting of love, empathy and turning the other cheek to the enemy, which the church had been playing on. Even though Martin Luther King Jr. was fighting for the civil rights through the filter of the Black Church, it is said that he lifted himself up in his own booth strops; he fought for his rights until he was killed, because in a lot of churches this concept of political activism was new until he blazed a new route, and mobilized church-denominations. He represented a role model for the Black Church which was new, because never before, had the church had any tradition for fighting on a top national level for civil and human rights, except from a few churches which adopted more radical grass-root strategies such as civil right protests in the streets and economical issues. My interviewee Ike shared his thoughts about the tension towards Church in Indianapolis:

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 272.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 273.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 274.

³⁷⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya. *The black Church in the African American experience*, 210.

Black folks are starving; how many white churches are coming down to support black churches? My niece wanted to go to a Christian Church. This church is beautiful, and it looks like it once was a Catholic Church one time. It's a beautiful big building and probably when the Catholics had it, it was also a school. Now it is a black church. I ask my niece and ask what is the most expensive building here? Church, she says. They are doing good. I say, what is across the street from church? She looks at me; a health care center. I say; you get to an accident, what is going to happen? Is somebody from the church coming out to put the hand on you to heal you? Or some of the doctors from the health center? This folks in the church with Cadillac are not giving you a dam thing. That is the issue I have with Christianity in American. They do no more than continuously making slaves out of us. Then the once who have prospered from it, are black folks in terms of black folks and Christianity. They do the same thing to us like the white folks have done to us. It is a dameable situation. Excuse me for being honest."

Because of its difficulties with establishing a structure within their own organization having through the history functioned as a rescue institution when the dominant society have excluded them and failed to meet their major needs, they have had a inner focus on their own community, instead of outside oriented focus. However, McGuire points to how the black denominational organizations are able to be critical of the larger society because of their location in the subordinate caste, based on the caste system imposed by the larger society which positioned all African-American institution in a situation of somewhat negative tension with the institutions of the larger society.³⁷⁸ In line with this, through the quoting above, Ike stressed how Christianity in America is continuing to making slaves out of the African-Americans (meaning Christian Blacks), through pointing to how black churches has started to adopt white behaviors through focusing on materialism, and ignoring social needs. His statement leads towards an important factor in this debate; the growing economic gap between the middle class and lower class African- Americans. If these two communities become disconnected from one another, according to Lincoln and Mamiya, analysts worry "that those who are relatively well-off socioeconomically may be less likely to utilize their increased resources for social change."³⁷⁹ Based on these accusations, the social capital rather than social action, seems to be the most important value, if they want it or not, for the African-American community³⁸⁰ Yet, even the focus on social capital, might be threatened if the class divisions in the Black Church continue to grow, in addition to white churches having a minimum emphasize on co-operational work with black congregations. As Ike pointed out, also McGuire underlines that there is considerable evidence, that many middle-class black churches are far

³⁷⁸ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 270.

³⁷⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya. 1990; the nature of social class and racial ties among African Americans is controversial. In McGuire. *Religion :The Social Context*, 280.

³⁸⁰ Social Capital: refers to nonmaterial investments (such as in social networks, values, and bounds of trust) that have potential future "payoffs" in terms of credit, reciprocal obligations, and incentives. Perhaps even more than money, social capital is a valuable resource to further the group`s- and not merely individual members` interests. Harris. 1999:88-89 in McGuire. 1993:273

less complacent than their white counterparts. McGuire underlines that social problems are arguably more overwhelming than before the civil right movement.³⁸¹ She stresses that some of the Black Churches have to spend half of its budgets on the poor, and in the face of massive societal problems, minority communities simply do not have the resources or the social structural leverage to make meaningful changes.³⁸² The burden of this reality seems to limit the Black Church to have a perspective limited towards their own burdens and challenges due to being a minority groups.

6.5 A Borderline Christian Experience

For many African- Americans it might appear conflicting, that a Christian identity most often is associated with having an integrationist profile, with its supposedly dialectical universality. In real life, for many African-Americans, it appears as this universality, based on Christian equality under the umbrella of the Christian Church in the U.S, has some requirements attached to the membership, in the sense of as long as they appear non- confrontational, keeping quiet about the still existing social discrimination, they are an accepted member of the universal Church. As long as civic religion is not reflecting Christian black minorities` voices, and as long as superficial relationships, through avoiding cooperation and ignoring social oppression within the black church are credited, the consequences might transfer through social challenges and relational difficulties between the Euro centered and Afro centered church. Alongside with this surface fellowship, there seem to be some differences on a symbolic level, between the African- American Christianity and the Euro-American Christianity. According to McGuire, “the slaves identified with the suffering Israelites in their bondage. While the Euro-American Protestants thought of their young country as the “New Israel”, or even the Promised Land, the African American experience was more like “the New Egypt”.”³⁸³

According to my interviewees, the slave trade history still influences the core of their being, and has remained a significant part of identity. The American Theologian Peter J, Paris, is pointing to the 150 years of slavery, where blacks rejected Christianity because they considered it to be the religion of their slave masters. Their rejection were rooted in an African henotheism that acknowledged the reality of gods apart from the specific one(s) that claimed a

³⁸¹ McGuire. *Religion: The social Context*, 270.

³⁸² Gilkes (1995) in McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 281.

³⁸³ McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*, 268.

people`s devotion. Having an African religious worldview is often synonymous with their life which means that different styles of life implied different religions and vice-versa. Nevertheless, studying the slave-trade history, it was evident to a majority of the slaves that in their experience the life/religion of slave masters was infiltrated by evil forces. From an African world-view, the slaves viewed the life/religion of the slave master as a consistent systematic whole, and consequently they saw no conflict between the slave master`s devotion in church and his or her vicious cruelties perpetrated daily on those in bondage.³⁸⁴ Paris underlines how the African slave`s understanding of religion as synonymous with life implied the sacred nature of all life and hence their total inability either to understand or appreciate the western notion of secularization.³⁸⁵ The fact that Black Christianity was established as an official religion under these conditions, seem to have negatively impacted and troubled the Black Christian Church and the African-American population`s identity in tremendous ways. It conflicted with their African identity in several ways. This particular tension seems to have influenced and infiltrated the history of the Black Church from its beginning, both in priestly, prophetic and social traditions and expressions. The autobiography of Peter Randolph³⁸⁶ from 1893, typifies the disposition of slaves on this matter:

The colored people had a very small place allotted them to sit in, so they used to get as near the window as they could to hear the preacher talk to his congregation. But, sometimes, while the preacher was exhorting to obedience, some of those outside would be selling refreshments, cake, candy and rum, and others would be horse-racing. This was the way, my readers, the Word of God was delivered and received in Prince George Country. The Gospel was so mixed with slavery, that the people could see no beauty in it, and feel no reverence for it ... The like of this is the preaching, and thesis are the men that spread the Gospel among the slaves. Ah! Such a Gospel had better be buried in oblivion, for it makes more heathens than Christians.”³⁸⁷

This perception still seems to influence my interviewees` experience of Church, especially due to their childhood` experiences, where some of them also grew up under the time of segregation. When asking Marcus what the black Christian Church was lacking, he responded with following answer: “a sense of really dependence.” A sense of independent religious thinking; even the Sunday school lessons they don`t come from American minds.

³⁸⁴ Paris, Peter “The Christian Way through the Black Experience.” *Word & World*, February 1986, 125.

³⁸⁵ Paris, Peter, “The Christian Way through the Black Experience.” *Word & World*, February 1986, 125.

³⁸⁶ b. 1825- d. 1897. “African slave who was freed from the death of his master, with an open mind like a scholar, with good judgement, and incisive reasoning.” (Quoted by Paul D. Sporer).

³⁸⁷ Peter Randolph. *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit. The Autobiography of rev. Peter Randolph*. Ed by Paul D. Sporer (Boston: James E. Earlie, 1893), 194-204.

You know, we are not up for that. You know, it is really yours. In my childhood days, we would see white Jesus faces all over the place, on the altars, the book of the pamphlets-it came from white “basts”, from the theology schools and white minds. We believe in African Americans as a whole, we are a new people on the planet, due to our circumstances that came going through slavery. People from Norway, even 120 years back, and they brought with them the culture and history. We don’t have that kind of history. We can’t call back to Africa and say: we have a business send me the products. How are you doing great grandpa? We can’t do that. And being a new people, that is very special

Through this example, he aimed to underline the hegemonic whiteness, which the churches are influenced and symbolically controlled by in terms of euro influenced religious symbolism and Jesus figures. Especially in terms of excluding Christian images, which also could have responded to the Blacks cultural context and image in a way that they could have associated and felt equally valued. Even though several Black Churches have developed and created their own black icons, there are several black churches today which still are under white parent denominations, and have kept the euro-influenced icon traditions. Despite some influence of liberation theology within black denominations, according to the American Johan Tangelde, Jesus images did not start showing up in the black churches before the mid 80`es, as Afro centrist thinking spread from campuses to congregation and the African American became aware of Africa as the foundation of both Judaism and Christianity.³⁸⁸ In a study conducted by Duke religion and culture, professor Eric Lincoln, pointed out 1705 black clergy from various denominations around the U.S asking whether or not it was important to have black figures represented in Sunday School Literature.³⁸⁹ 68% responded affirmatively, and 32% responded negatively. The result showed that the majority/minority of them felt that the skin color wasn’t important in relating to the message of Jesus, but many African- American church leader means that a historically accurate image of Jesus is essential for developing a good self-esteem among African-Americans.³⁹⁰This is one of many elements which he still felt made the Church dependant to the dominant power, and which underlines that the slave`s difficulties (400 years ago) of mixing gospel and discrimination, still is relevant today through the alienation of blacks within the church.

³⁸⁸ Johan D. Tangelde. “*Jesus in North America: The black Jesus.*” Available from: <http://www.reformedreflections.co>

³⁸⁹ Lincoln. *The Black experience of African American Christianity*, 317.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

6.6 THE “INVISIBLE” BLACK CHURCH

Worship and spirits as social activism

In today's North American society, the majority of the African-American population consider themselves Christians.

Danny underlined the power and strength of social capital within the Black Church, however, he added that the strength of communality alone was not fulfilling enough in order for him to stay within church. According to my male interviewees there seemed to be a “missing link” in their relationship to the Church. One of this missing links was the lack of radical social activism. This further resulted in putting them into new directions in search for a filter which could be brave enough to let their fight against the existing system be heard even outside the Church, without having to fear discrimination, and be stigmatized by the white neighbor or fellow Christian. Many of my male interviewees left Church in order to find a filter which would communicate their activism against racism and discrimination. One of my interviewees criticized the Black Church for just having the thoughts and the ideas, without following it up through social action, and described the Church as a “recruit ground for Islam, based on their lack of social action”.³⁹¹

Despite of the criticism, the American theologian, Costen, on the other hand argues for the long tradition of social action in the Black Christian Church in America, especially having been a filter for speaking out the frustration of discrimination and disfranchisement. However, the filter has not been political but rather spiritual. Historically, slaves developed a worship life of their own in secret places at times determined by the slave community. In search for the truth of the gospel, slaves established ways to express their faith in worship and in their daily lives commensurate to their understanding of the biblical message.³⁹² The slaves transformed the Americanized version of Christianity into a form which they could identify with. This was most often done by grafting “Christian ideas into traditional African roots.”³⁹³ Looking back through the history, this secret worship life of the slaves later became known as the “Invisible institution.” Invisible in the meaning of nature of events where mutual relation-

³⁹¹ Costen. *African American Christian Worship*, 36.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Leonard E. Barret. *Soul Force: African Heritage and Afro-American Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1974), 96.

ships, world views, behavior patterns, and social and political actions were “officially constituted” by slaves. Gathering of the “Invisible Institution” occurred with such frequency that they are considered foundational to the subsequent establishment of African-American “visible institutions”: congregations, denomination, schools, burial, association and organization for the pursuit of justice and equality.³⁹⁴ In an effort to find freedom and understanding, traditional beliefs and practices, Christian beliefs and practices and the reality of existence merged. As a result, a unique African-American Christian faith was shaped. In this context, the image of the biblical Jesus, who could identify with their circumstances, was clearly a liberator. “His defeat of all earthly oppression, assured in his resurrection, ascension, and promise of peace, was the foundation of hope for the slave.”³⁹⁵ One of the most distinguishing characteristics of worship in African- American Christianity is the inseparability of elements. Music, movement, and the song still seem to be constant dynamic, providing the foundation upon which all elements were carried out.

These rituals function as a filter where the churchgoers get refilled through a social comforting network (see: social capital) and through rituals being filled up by the Holy Ghost in order to cope with difficulties until next week they meet. Lincoln is underlining how “the black church’s priestly functions throughout the history, was its provisions of comfort, nurture and care among an outcast people; “a refuge in a hostile white world”, where they could sing, shout, laugh and cry among those who understood and shared the pain.³⁹⁶” According to Cone, the Black Church has been the place where black could be free of white, people, free of Jim Crow, free of everything that demeaned and humiliated them.³⁹⁷

However, despite of this priestly function, the majority of the mainstream protestant churches say they have managed to separate the slave-masters religion from the true universal Christianity. Never less, the slave-trade history, which weekly is being retold through the hymns in the worship service, still seems to play a significant role through the strong emphasis on hope and liberation to African-Americans.

One of my female interviewees recalled how she as a little girl could not stand the shouting which was going on during the services in the Baptist Church:

³⁹⁴ Costen. *African American Christian Worship*, 36.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁹⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Saga of Christianity*, 273.

³⁹⁷ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm & American. A dream or a nightmare*, 25.

In the Baptist Community I didn't really feel connected because I didn't really care for the shouting, in the black churches there are a lot of shouting....and I was really discomfited by that. So much that my sister told my mother; mama, if you ever shout, we will never come back to church. And you know what? She never did. What do you think it suggested to us? Well, is this really real, or is it a performance? But I was always discomfited by that, and that was a big part of my dis-comfort. It wasn't so much the music; I liked the music and you could really go into the rhythms and all that, and that pastor was saying.....in it didn't really connect with me, because the music is the overpowering spirit of the church.

This later resulted in Aisha not being connected spiritually to any particular church, despite the fact that she always had thought about herself as spiritual based on her relationship with God rather than the church.

Modes of expression that are unique to African-American worshipers are imbued with the power to replace some of the enforced political models and the controlling mechanisms in society. Spiritually "high" moments generated by the ecstasy and intensity in worship are luminal or marginal experiences where the social status of the community has been redefined.³⁹⁸ According to Cone, "the unique models of responding, praying, preaching, singing, gathering and greeting, foster and nurture the anti structural dimension of social awareness." Cone further apply the meaning into today's society; anti-structures created by and for the powerless and arenas where hope and faith, inherent in the Word of God, can find natural responses. The common African heritage and the socialization process in a racist society provide the foundation for many aspects of worship that connect African-Americans and transcend denominational labels.³⁹⁹

The corporate worship of God through ritual action involves people in relationship with each other. Unhealthy societal structures can be transcended in worship as the gathered community, consciously or subconsciously, reacts to established structures while generating new ones.

Costen, describes getting filled by the Holy Spirit as religious ecstasy,⁴⁰⁰ and underlines how African Americans understand this as a special diving moment of happiness and joy during the spontaneous encounter with the enabling of the Holy Spirit. This particular séance can

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 107.

³⁹⁹ Costen. *African American Christian Worship*, 79.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 48.

also be referred to as “getting happy.”⁴⁰¹Historically, hearing the words from the Bible, interpreted in the light of their oppressed condition, freed the slave worshipers to pour out their sufferings and needs and express their joys in their own sacred space. They could obtain mental and emotional release in spite of their physical enslavement. The worship sessions were also a time where they could give and receive affirmation, support and encouragement-worshipping God with their whole being.⁴⁰² From an anthropological perspective, Victor Turner⁴⁰³ is pointing to how worship can function as “anti-structures.” He argues that worship as a ritual provides an opportunity to create new symbols, which produce structures and anti-structures.⁴⁰⁴ Cone underlines how “the ritual action of worship allows the worshiper to transcend social structures imposed by the dominant culture, thus generating anti-structures. Under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit freedom is granted and new meaning is give to live.”⁴⁰⁵ According to McGuire, when a social problem appears, the church`s religious action to address the problem may be spiritual as well as social. She points to how social action in this setting becomes a parallel to religious action, where a congregation attacks the problems of inner-city drug addiction, not only with programs for youth and a halfway house for recovering addicts, but also buy a series of prayers-marches and rebuking of the spirit of drug addiction. McGuire argues how the rebuking of spirits becomes equally “real” activism as the building of the halfway house.⁴⁰⁶ Cone also argues how African-Americans celebrate these facts in ways that “meet the psychological needs of the community and empower them to action, as well as acquiring coping skills without the aid of professional psychiatrists.”⁴⁰⁷ Many of my interviewees claim that the Black Christian Church suffer a handicap due to being introverted, not speaking up for the still un-going inequality and un-justice towards African-American in the U.S society. In their case, the certain aspects of worship rituals as transforming power for social activism, is not enough, and is losing its meaning.

6.7 Lacking of theology in the Black Christian Church?

In this section I aim to focus on the Black Church`s identity through focusing on the lack of biblical emphasizes which some of my interviewees claims to be there. I will also look at its

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 49.

⁴⁰³ Victor Turner: b.May 28thDec 18th, 1983. A cultural anthropologist born in Glasgow, Scotland.

⁴⁰⁴ Victor Turner in Costen. *African American Christian Worship*,23.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰⁶ McGuire. *Religion:The Social Context*, 275.

⁴⁰⁷ Costen. *African American Worship*, 122.

establishing process and how a certain tradition had been created as a response to its surrounding context and the need of a people whom had been struggling for their rights through their entire history.

Cathrine converted to Islam when she was 18. When asking her why she converted to Islam, she responded that “my whole thinking when I converted was that I would have a better understanding of Christianity”. She further underlined how Islam fulfilled the book of Christianity to her meaning:

When I read the first passage in the book, and the history connecting it to the religion, that was what converted me to the religion. Because I could understand the purpose of Christianity and that helped me understand Islam. Just after having read the interdiction, I knew the Quran where the book was telling me about the story of Jesus and his unmarried mother and why the religion existed in order to bring Islam, so it is about the missing part in the puzzle that was put in place. Christianity had always left me with a lot of questions, but then, when I read that, it connected the two religions, I felt that it had a completion of that I wanted to fulfill. I didn't need to go in and hear somebody talk about it, and that connection really made me feel me know what I was searching for, because I used to look for and listen to a lot of preachers on TV.

This conversion story also put a focus to one of the factors that many of my interviewees pointed out as a missing link within the Christian Church to the extent that they left the church: the lack of biblical knowledge.

One of my interviewees, Ike, underlined how the African-American always have been “a pretty spiritual people”, and recalled how his preacher grandpa (born 1875) used to act in church. “I don't believe that his education level was great. The book he was preaching from, I don't know if he actually could read it. Pretty many times I have been to churches, where pretty dynamic preachers have not referred to anything from the bible. I think it is a good portion of it.” What is important to have in mind, is that black preaching style grew out and got shaped out from pretty special surroundings. In the invisible church, which we have mentioned in earlier chapters, the word of God and the strong focus on free worshipping were the foundation of the meetings. With that in mind, I wish to ask: was the real focus and emphasize on the preaching? According to Costen, the slaves perceived God as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, especially in the slave Spirituals, and indivisible unity. Cone underlined that “for black slaves, Jesus is God, (breaking) himself into (our) historical presence and transforming it according to divine expectation.” According to Costen, the preacher, therefore,

played an important role as mediator/priest and especially prophet. She underlines how slaves were familiar with the comparable roles from the African heritage, where the preacher functioned with a role as a mediator/priest as “the voice of God.”⁴⁰⁸ This underlines that the first preachers function as a leader, diviner, seer and medium are rooted in African traditions.⁴⁰⁹ As time followed in the more resent Christian context in the U.S, African-American “prophets” combined the African and Judeo-Christian roles as charismatic leader called God to hear and then make forthright pronouncement as divine prophets.⁴¹⁰ The fact that the African- American church went from “praise houses” to the invisible institution where they included preaching, created a concern among the slave owners, who were stating that there should be more praying and less preaching, for preaching breed faction, but praying causes devotion.” In the slave owners attempts to limit and hide the biblical message as a hole, seem to have influenced the black preachers through emphasizing on the prophetic voice from God to even a stronger degree and before. “God tol` me” that freedom was right down the road; we got to be patient.” Costen underlines how the prophetic role as preacher was to listen to ‘the Word’ and help the congregation calling the community to patience and claim the new? Costen argues that what appeared to outsiders as passive joy and happiness in their contemporary state was instead the African world view “strategy of patience” as a means of survival.⁴¹¹ In the establishment of African-American denominations and congregations in Euro-American denominations, an “official” preacher needed a license from a church which was given for a specific area or for a more extended outreach for a limited period of time. According to Costen, many preachers were neither ordained nor licensed, but were allowed to serve as “exhorters.” Despite the lack of license, the African- American preachers were the trailblazer for the African- American worship, through the mixture of roles functioning as a spiritual leader, politician, priest, prophet and storyteller.⁴¹²

My interviewees` statement of the lack of biblical focus and the passivity of the Church might have its background in context of its establishment. In today`s society there are a variety of preaching styles in Black worship. Yet, the traditional perception is, according to Costen, that the preacher is able to “tell the story” (literally communicate) in language, symbols, and symbolic mannerisms that speak directly to the needs of worshipers. The preaching is biblical

⁴⁰⁸ Costen. *African American Worship*, 46.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴¹² Costen. *African American Worship*, 82.

based, combining the message with descriptive imagery and tonal and word paintings- this combination is suppose to give the stories life in the imagination of the worshippers. Another method which is characteristic for the preaching style in the Black Church is the dialogical communication between the preacher and the congregation, through a verbal “call-and response” African form. Many times this dialog can turn into a musical dialog even with a skilled organized or pianist.⁴¹³ Costen, underlines the important characteristics of hermeneutics in Black preaching is the empowerment of the preacher to create an atmosphere wherein the preacher and listener might hear the Word by experiencing it. In this way, the preacher has to be so familiar with the story that he or she during the preaching moment, become the biblical character with the aim to create an atmosphere in which the listeners can themselves become the Word of God incarnate at the moment.⁴¹⁴ These hermeneutic elements in the preaching style obviously represent another structure than the typical general Euro- rooted Christian expressions which exist as a main core despite of the variety of denominations and congregations in the protestant churches. Several of my interviewees pointed to the lack of theological competency within the black churches they attended, both in the preaching and especially due to theological questions they had when wanting to develop their biblical knowledge. This also might have its background in the Black Church (in some way) forced prioritized focus of on the topic: liberation, hope and faith as a respond to the oppressive circumstances throughout the history and up today. It is important to underline that a great amount of preachers within the African-American Church today is highly educated compared to back in the 60es (when some of my interviewees grew up). Despite this fact, the preaching tradition which grew out from uneducated preachers, with the strong emphasize on liberation and African ritual elements, is still highly alive within African-American congregations and denominations today, despite the educational level. Whether the church was lacking a holistic theological approach, due to the preacher`s maybe unbalanced focus on biblical stories and the particular interest for certain chapters in the bible, the preacher within the black church was not first of all suppose to be a theologian, but a multifunctional role-player in (responding to lack of social structure, discrimination etc..) in a more diverse way than what you could expect of a Euro-American Church preacher. The Black Church is many times, referred to as the first Black theater in the African American community, which based on personal experiences has some elements of truth.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 130.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 131.

6.8 Secularism

It's a usual notion to make assumptions that Muslims fundamentalism is a response to secularization of the society. In that aspect it also seems to be easy to assume that Muslim conversions in general is a result of secularization. Some of my interviewees` refer to the secularization of Christianity, claiming that the backbone of Christianity is taken away. In this section I aim to focus on why my interviewees claim that the backbone of Christianity is taken away in the sense of blaming Christians of showing a double moral attitude: exemplified that you can do whatever you want to do, as long as you go to church on Sunday and pay off for the week. I will be focusing on the discussion to what extend American religious identity is linked up to nationalism. Through that focus I will focus on some specific topics which I hope can contribute to an interesting perspective to my interviewees reasoning for leaving Christianity. In a debate in pew forum, about civic religion, it was questioned whether civic expression fit with the history of the civic religion? I rather find it natural when minority groups are questioning who the God is in the U.S civic religion. Civic religions can easily be misinterpreted as a national religion which I find very interesting in this debate. Civic religion was developed by the American sociologist Robert N. Bellah, and was originally quoted as a term in 1967.⁴¹⁵ American civil religion consist of references to God or divine providence present in the declaration of independence the Constitution and the content of inaugural speeches delivered by American Presidents. The term civil religion was originally taken from Jean- Jacques Rousseau`s The social Contract. This referred to a belief system that supports the political authority of the State. In order to favor the endorsement of civic authority, Rousseau recommended the development of social harmony through the Roman concept of pietas - piety. This term that has a wider meaning than "religion" and extends the correct relations with parents, friends, fellow-citizens and the gods; "Piety is justice with regards to the gods" wrote Cicero-On the Nature of the Gods. But can civil religion be considered as a national Christian religion?_In this particular quest, Bellah dispels any suggestion that it has rigid traditional Christian doctrinal content or origin, or is a substitute for Christianity. He contends that civil religion has a similar unifying role and function as religion, but is specifically political. As such it appeals to all the people with different backgrounds.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Robert N. Belleah. "Civil Religion in America " in *Dædalus. American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Fall 2005, Vol.134, No.4, Pg 40-55. 2005.

⁴¹⁶ Michael A Rizzotti. "'Religion" and American Civil Religion," September 10, 2005. Available from: <http://www.knol.google.com/k/michalel-a.rizzitu/religio-and-american-civil>.

Considering the separation of Church and State, how is it possible for national authorities approaching God in political public speeches? The answer might be rooted that the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm of religious dimensions. Although matters of personal religious beliefs, worship and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are at the same time, certain common element of religious orientation that the great majority of American shares. These values seem to have played an essential role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole setting of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension which is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals, is what Bellah is calling a "civil religion."

Source

Using religious rhetoric as civil rhetoric can be pretty confusing. Even though there exist a separation between Christian religion and civil religion, it might appear difficult to recognize the separation line. Is the private religion pointing to Christ while the civil religion is referring to God as a creator? Bellah makes a distinction between the civil religion and the rest of the religious aspects. He points out just certain sides of God's character as typical for the civic religion: God of freedom and the God of order is the ruling characteristic of the civil religion; Imam Rauf in underlining how the author of the Declaration and Constitution focused especially on the social aspect of the Abrahamic ethic, the right and liberties of individuals and their freedom to practice their religion, or practice their no religion at all, as their consciences dictated without intervention from the state. These rights flow from the Abrahamic ethic, from the second commandment to treat one's fellow human beings the way one wants to be treated. But the founders generally believed in one God, God the creator of everything thus of nature. Their concept of such a God was very much the Abrahamic concept. This concept is not a universal concept, but a monotheistic concept. The German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, is pointing to the issue of the multicultural drama in a secular society. He refers to "how the secularists insist on the indispensability of including all citizens as equals in civil society, based on the fact that democratic order can't simply be imposed on its authors, the constitutional state confronts its citizens with the demanding expectations of an ethics of citizenship that reaches beyond mere obedience to the law". In that setting he underlines the importance of religious citizens of a community to not only superficially adjust to the constitutional order, but to appropriate their secular legitimating of constitutional principles under the premises of

their own faith.⁴¹⁷ Habermas is also underlining that “it is the religious communities that will themselves decide whether they can recognize in a reformed faith their true faith.”⁴¹⁸ Many denominations have moved in that direction with emphasizing on the historical-hermeneutical approach, which has made the protestant denomination recognize part of their faith in the historical aspect.

What Habermas is referring to, said with other words, is the priority of certain elements of the religions. With the separation of Church and State I believe Gods personality has become split, often in the sense of a unusual divided personality, through showing one side of God who rules the political scene in the official life and another contrasting character on the private scene. This, I believe, easily misleads people to get a confused image of God, valuing and emphasizing on certain suitable characteristics of God, which benefits the U.S political strategies and valuing and emphasizing completely different images and characteristics of God in the private scene, which is not shared in public. The consequences might result in a non-complete, hard to get, double moral, unbalanced and untrue image of God; like one of my interviewees were commenting; “there is so many varieties of Christianity. It has been watered out. Despite the separation between church and state, while still using religious rhetoric in the public scene, this automatically signalize another message where you might make associations with the Christian Church, which further for the African-Americans throughout the history has been viewed as euro-centered. In such a setting, culture and religion might flow into a inseparable mix, where religion is being viewed as culture and culture as religion, and soon the skeleton and bones is being removed from the body of Christ as my interviewee were commenting .With the political rhetoric of the U.S referring to a supreme God who is always on their side, also with the political strategy can give a dangerous and unbalanced image of God who easily can be perceived as unjust from a minority`s perspective.

Another important facet is the ritual aspect of the civil religion. Kennedy stated that civil religion was only a ritual aspect and nothing more. This also seems to be strongly conflicting with many of the minority citizens in the U.S, who has strongly emphasized on the rituals throughout the history, as the survival spiritual and physical tool in crises symbolizing hope and faith in God. However, it seems like the symbolism and the language of rituals has differ-

⁴¹⁷ Jurgen Habermas. 2008. Notes on a post-secular society. Both religious and secular mentalities must be open to a complementary learning process if we are to balance shared citizenship and cultural difference. (*June*). [Http://www.signdandsight.com/features/1714](http://www.signdandsight.com/features/1714)(accessed April 10th, 2009).

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

ent meaning to different ethnical and denominational groups. For many U.S citizens, life is seen as a whole sphere; public rituals such as the independence day, or memorial day, is suppose to reflect an inner belief, transforming its ethics and moral into a hermeneutical circle. This mix of rituals is what I believe is what my African-American interviewees are referring to when they blamed the Christianity to have become “too secular and watered out”: the rituals which were the communication between the private religious and the public sphere have disappeared, and become melted into become one. While the public sphere still is speaking a religious rhetoric language which is referring to God.

In this discussion I also find it important to take a look at the Black Christian church`s links to the secular sphere. According to Lincoln, in the black church the mixing between spheres has been specially significant. Culture is the form of religion and religion is the heart of culture. The theologian Paul Tillich underlines how the religion among African-American is expressed in cultural forms like in music and songs, styles and content of preaching, and modes of worship. At the same time, religion is also the heart of culture because it raises the core values of that culture to ultimate levels and legitimates them. In line with this, Lincoln stresses how “the relationship between the black sacred cosmos and black culture in general is similar, where the core values of black cultures like freedom, justice, equality and African heritage, and racial equality at all levels of human intercourse are raised to ultimate levels and legitimated by the black sacred cosmos.” He underlines “although this cosmos is largely Afro Christian in nature due to its religious history, it has also reputed in other black militant, nationalistic, and non-Christian movements.”⁴¹⁹

Even though church and state is separated, I believe that “religion can lose its integrity if we turn it into something that we use only for the purpose of the moment.”⁴²⁰ The Church might lose its integrity when the religious rhetoric which is used in politics, is suppose to just be religious and not particularly Christian, and further is used to legalize political and national strategies. To split Gods holistic character, distinguishing him between the creator God and the savior God, limits God from being God and leave Christianity with a boarder-line image. This changing character of God`s image may further influence the image that citizens get from the church, even though Church and state are suppose to be two separated institutions.

⁴¹⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya. *History of Religion*, 7,

⁴²⁰ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. “God Bless America: Reflections on Civil Religion After September 11.” Wednesday, Feb 6, 2002. 10:00-11:30am. Washington, D.C. Quoted from E.J. Dionne from the Event Trascript.

Summary:

In this chapter we have seen how Islam is presenting a concept of itself as a “Universal religion,” that is through presenting a history with a positive undertone that has attached my interviewees to the extent where they got converted. Through getting introduced to a positive history reflecting pride and dignity traced back in time before the slave trade seem to have impacted many of my interviewees` self-esteem tremendously. The history has also given them a better understanding of the African-American culture and its role in civilization. Through getting to know this part of their history, having roots from a great culture, seems to bring a “wholeness” to the African-American identity. It is also importance to notice that my interviewees could hardly underline deeply enough, the importance of not mixing Islam and Arabism, especially due to them being tired of being oppressed under someone else`s thinking for too long. Islam had also functioned as a tool dealing with racism and exclusion. We have seen examples of where Islam have been used as a tool for maximum freedom, not having to focus on the issues attached to being a black minority, but rather switching the focus on to a religion which has its own Dean.⁴²¹ Despite of this the majority of my interviewees has emphasized strongly the importance of Islam being contextualized, responding to their western(?), national and ethical society. Considering my interviewees` identity in terms of belonging; through the three given options; national identity, Muslim identity and African-American identity, they all viewed Muslim identity with greatest importance and relevance to their lives, followed by African- Americans, and the last one on the list; the national identity. My interviewees pointed out the concept of *Umma* with special significance to their Muslim religion, which also underlined their number one prioritized Muslim identity. *Umma*, the community of faith, a spiritual community uniting all Muslims, men and woman, which throughout their attachment to Islam offer them intimacy with God and the community. According to my interviewees the rituals connects them to a deeper level with Allah and offers a stabile community, locally and internationally, across borders, nationalities and the color of the skin. Said with other words; collective uniting rituals above class differences within or outside Church.

It seems that the Muslim identity, through the rituals were more appealing, with its collective uniting rituals, than the National identity (also referred to as civic identity) and its rituals as an American citizens. We have through the chapter seen that nationality and religion easily get mixed up. Despite the separation between church and State, there is also an existence of

⁴²¹ Meaning; way of life.

mixed rhetoric, identifying Christianity a false filter for political and national interests. Even though religion and civic religious expressions are different, they many times replace one another and in that case Christian rhetoric is used as civil rituals without replacing it? This, I believe, is the foundation for the claim that the Christian Church is unattractive, watered out, and messed up. Having this rhetoric mix, Christianity can easily become presented as a religion with a multiple of expressions having lost its backbone - it finally become a religion which is hard to get a hold of. This also results in what my interviewees` referred to as “lacking the un-limbo of submission.” As Habermas underlined, having a state practicing the civic rituals, including religious expressions, not replacing them, this results in letting certain elements of the faith getting prioritized, such as the historical aspect which become the only focus in order to not offend but rather benefit a multi-cultural and religious nations` needs. This I believe, even though having its positive uniting elements, it seems that my interviewees are missing clarity and the one truth in the midst of the various expressions of Christianity and the Christian Church.

Many of my interviewees referred to the concept of Islam as a working religion that gave them focus on transforming the negative energy to a positive energy. It also gave them a focus on determination. They claimed that Muslim rituals are more applicable to the need of having a structure in life and getting stability and closeness to God, also based on its universality. Strong emphasis on syncretistic expressions from the African heritage still underlined the sectarian need as a response to the hegemonic power even with Christianity which appear to be the U.S`s civic religion.

According to my interviewees the memory of their negative history within the church were of a too strong emphasize within the Black Church, through a homogenous focus on liberation both in the worship rituals and preaching style, as a spiritual and psychological release. Also factors such as too strong on Euro-American elements of what is referred to as whiteness, were factors also that caused many of my informants to feel that biblical/theological knowledge and focus was lacking and ignored.

Another element which seemed to be important was the worship which meant to be a parallel to social action, were spiritual warfare through the worship should channelize a new social construction both on a psychological level and such as a society structured level. My interviewees were suspicious towards the Black Church`s one way focus on worship rituals, over-

emphasizing on the spiritual warfare. For them, the outgoing focus was absent. This underlines that the African-American Church member were still sort of a house slave, not brave enough to fight for the right in the political sphere. My informants` claim against the African American Church that it is the white man`s religion, can also be based on the fact that the African-American Church got created under the dominant society`s religion, despite being freed slaves having their own denominations, they still seem to be under the parent denominations` control. Their claim of the African-American church being introverted in the meaning of not participating on the socio-political level, can be linked to the African-American Church already being victim of social structured discrimination getting less financial contribution from the state due to the geographical location of the church in the ghetto (compared to the white sub-urban areas). The church has therefore not enough capacity to do more than dealing with the overwhelming social need within the church.

7. CONCLUSION

During the last years Muslim conversions have increased among African-Americans, especially among African-Americans converting from Christianity to Islam. Through my thesis I have investigated the particular factors that made my interviewees convert to Islam.

In the interviews, I experienced that my interviewees raised subjects as Black identity, nationalism, gender, experienced racism, and a feeling of second hand citizenship as major reasons for their conversion. That is why I treat the subject of Black identity to such a strong extent, rather than focusing primarily on theological aspects of conversion.

I have applied a phenomenological approach to the interviews, where my interviewees have shared their life experiences through what they presented as their conversion story. I have compared and contrasted these stories, filtering out similarities and differences in order to see tendencies clearly. The aim has been to search for patterns in what had an impact on the conversions, both on a collective and an individual level. I have analyzed the empirical data in light of theories from multiple fields in order to give a holistic and fair understanding of conversions, a method recommended by psychologist and theologian, Lewis Rambo. In my methodological part of the thesis I have focused on crises' impact on conversion- with a particular focus on traumatic experiences rising from social exclusion on both at a micro and a macro level, based on the theory of self-hood never being independent from its social environment. Taking McGuire's definition into consideration: "a transformation of one's self concurrent with a transformation of one's basic meaning system.(...) It often changes the sense of who one is and how one belong in the social situation. Conversions also transform the way the individual perceives the rest of the society and his or her personal place in it, altering one's view of the world."⁴²²

Obviously, my interviewees' given place as "Blacks" in the U.S society including the Christian Church, left a feeling of dissatisfaction, which made them, consciously and unconsciously, search for a meaning-system which could offer an internal and external alternative focus, replacing the negative factors attached to black stigma and discrimination, with positive ones.

⁴²² Meredith B. McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*. (Belmont CA: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group 2002),73.

In the background and context chapter, we have seen how Black identity has become stereotyped by the hegemonic power, starting with the slave trade, and its` obvious violation of the slaves` dignity, and later through techniques like separationist and discriminating discourses. The slave/master metaphor, basically saying that the wise should rule the unwise, may explain how African-Americans have been derived from their rights in order for the hegemonic power to remain superior. This metaphor seems to have been an impediment in developing a positive identity, caused by an often negative black presented essence- pointing to one of the two presented models of identity, by Stuart Hall.

In the fourth chapter, I have focused on Black identity versus a collective identity with a particular focus on essentialist versus a discontinuous identity. I have focused on how negative stereotyping of African- American as a collective group, has stigmatized the African-Americans as an un-differentiated oneness. This particular process seems to have put limitation and created obstacles for African-Americans towards a discontinuous development of identity, where civil rights, human rights, equal education, job opportunities, and treatment within the major social institutions should be taken for granted. In the interviews, there are many examples of discriminating episodes from both church institutions, and the criminal and educational system. "The fear of the white man" has obviously increased as a consequence of such experiences. These episodes and reflections have further influenced my interviewees` sense of alienation within their own nation, causing an internal distancing from the melt-pot analogy. Yet, only one of my interviewees experienced what might be considered as a traumatizing life crisis. His crisis was of such a strong character that the search for another meaning system which could offer mental, spiritual and social comfort and completeness became necessary. He was wrongly accused and imprisoned for 13 years, even though the original felony was around 1 year. Statistics and analyzes show that this is not an unusual case. Rather, black males are perceived as belonging to a stereotype, despite of class and educational background. In addition to this particular traumatizing life crisis, the collective crises which African-Americans as a people have experienced throughout history will be individually processed and internalized depending upon the persons` class and social context and can in certain cases be transformed into an individual trauma, influencing the identity shaping process. However, despite of Halls presentations of discontinues points of identification, there seemed to exist an experience of stagnation where the hegemonic power limited the African-American groups from developing freely in a democratic society. Franz Fanon, on the other hand emphasized different aspects of the identity crises, pointing to the problem of African-

American not having valued themselves, a problem also stressed by the psychiatrist Eric Lincoln. According to him, negative bi-effects will appear if an individual or a cultural group lacks confidence about their own identity. In many cases, focusing on the essence which have been suppressed and stolen from the African-American culture might be a necessary route, in order to reclaim a person's heritage and particular history in a prideful manner. This also points to the importance of having an identity safely anchored in the "patrimony" of a cultural identity in order to produce a workable psychosocial equilibrium." Coming to terms with one's past, can have a liberating effect which might play an important factor for both ethnic groups and individuals for developing what Hall frames as a discontinues point of identity.

Yet, it is important to notice that this process does not require neither an escapism or stagnation in its historical identity, but rather chooses to acknowledge the painful past as a reality, without letting the negativity attached to it be internalized through hatred and bitterness towards the surroundings. This I believe will play a significant role in order to "move on", and take advantage of the educational and economic opportunities that U.S citizenship provides. One's approach (whether integrationist or assimilationist) to the surrounding discriminating system, is to a certain degree, an individual choice- yet, it is important not to underestimate the consequences of mistreatment and abuse which easily leads to traumatized identity, often developing a fear towards the antagonist. This fear will most probably create a vicious circle getting transformed into anger towards the "system." Many of my interviewees shared stories from discriminating episodes of random harassment from both childhood and adulthood due to being black- they also shared the internal fear they are reselling with in adult age. One of my interviewees who underlined this fear, had worked in the prison system in his entire life- knowing what he was talking about. He feared the consequences of not having the ability to defend himself and getting his life destroyed in prison, for a charge which he is not responsible for (based on what he had been witnessing).

In my thesis I focused on certain aspects of the criminal institution, based on the large number of African-American converts to Islam in prison. I also touched the impoverished conditions of the Black ghetto culture, where inhabitants often live with a minimum of life necessities, considering themselves as victims of the system, stuck into a black negative identity which is represented as the classic example of stereotyped black identity on the hegemonic powers' terms. Since the majority of my interviewees are considered as middle class black Americans this mentioned internalized fear of the discriminating system, and humiliating treatment of

the predominately white surroundings, indicates that racism is not just a dilemma experienced by particularly black poor or ghetto inhabitants- but is experienced across class divisions. However, there seemed to exist a difference among the two groups. According to some interviewees of mine, the black middle class with an integrationist approach do not necessarily share their humiliating experiences due to discrimination, especially not with whites. In the black ghetto, on the other hand, the anger seems to be more present, and has become a common identity mark of social integrity, and reasons for segregation. In order to climb up the social ladder to a middle class status certain educational and economic goals must be achieved. For the middle class (decent families) communicating negative factors attached to black stigma might create difficulties, less chances, and tense relations limiting them from accomplishing their dreams. In the black ghetto class, on the other hand, many have become stuck in a vicious circle caused by factors mixed of poverty and racism, with nothing to lose if expressing their anger openly, in terms of a social network and possibilities of a discontinues positive identity.

In the third chapter I presented Du Bois` double consciousness metaphor, pointing to the complex dilemma of being both African and American in a western U.S. At an individual level, among African- Americans there seem to be especially two settings where it would be meaningful to apply Du Bois` double consciousness metaphor. First, having to switch between an African and an American identity due to being an African-American in America. Second: belonging to an African-American middle class and surrounded by the ghetto culture, or vice-versa. According to some of my interviewees, there exists a special tension between white Americans and African-Americans due to ethnicity, but there also exists a negative stereotyping and discrimination due to classism within their own African-American society. This is also underlined by scholars in the field, like Elijah Anderson. Some of my interviewees emphasized that there existed an un-going tension where both groups (black middle and lower class) which stereotyped each other`s life and actions due to their class belonging. As one of my interviewees pointed out: “we were once one folk striving for the same goal- now we are torn apart....”

Some of my interviewees criticized the black middle class (decent people) for leaving the ghetto and churches behind in poor conditions, ignoring their own people and black institutions when their economic framework allowed them to move on. On the other hand, according to others of my interviewees, the black ghetto (street people) class has internalized their im-

poverished status and disconnected themselves from the poverty through creating their own codes of the streets, which makes it difficult to both whites and black middle-class to feel accepted by them. My interviewees pointed to the challenges of connecting to “brothers and sisters” in the ghetto without knowing what Elijah Anderson refers to as the particular codes of the streets, or being able to role switch. In today’s society, to move on from a stereotyped and victimized identity in many ways requires an integrationist approach, not separation. Focusing on Hall’s discontinues identity, living in the ghetto might limit an integrationist approach, since the black essence has become the core of the identity marker of self defense. In chapter five, I have focused on African- Americans as a diaspora group, representing a unique diaspora nation within a nation. This complexity sheds light upon the complexity of my interviewees` life-stories.

The academic background of my interviewees where a majority of them have completed a higher education, might suggest that they went through what Rambo would call an intellectual conversion.⁴²³ However, the majority went through an experimental conversion which involves active exploration of religious options. According to Rambo, “potential converts [are] urged to take nothing on faith but to try the theology, rituals and organizations for themselves and discover if the system is true(that is, beneficial or supportive for them).”⁴²⁴ My interviewees were searching (for different reasons) for a new system of meaning which would make them feel complete, and which could offer them “internal peace.” The spiritual journey had different starting points and timeframes, depending upon the individual interviewee’s socialization process and life experience. Many of them experienced difficulties with being black children in Christian churches with a strong emphasize on white Jesus icons, while others experienced white Catholic staff trying to “civilize” them. Many negative factors were also perceived in difficulties in the Black Church`s un-separated rituals due to the sacramental elements, where worship, preaching, shouting-and spiritual manifestations growing out from the invisible church, felt alien and scaring from a child`s point of view. Another criticism which was expressed pointed to the lack of social activism in a political manner and the emphasis on spiritual warfare, as a way of internalizing the discrimination African Americans experienced.

⁴²³ Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 14.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

According to my interviewees, there was a strong feeling of alienation and exclusion which made a withdrawal from the American National identity attractive. The National American identity felt alien and distanced which also included the institution of the Christian Church. The search for a new identity including both a religious and national identity was needed. Through the membership with the nation-state “Nation of Islam”, their social and spiritual needs got reaffirmed. The membership offered an alternative understanding of their diaspora identity. Being a diaspora group which often is seen as a non-national proclivity seemed to make them search for a reversible originality combined with a physical reality confirming their essence, where it was possible to be a black person in its whole being. Longing for a U.S which would include them as equal, national citizens in their search for jobs and education, in their encounters with the police, courts and other socio-political institutions, yet not experiencing it, made them turn from a hostile humiliating nation to a Nation under the name of Islam.

Especially the NOI’s “do it for yourself movement” impacted their self-image tremendously, transforming their inner being from being a minority to a majority: from being discriminated to becoming valued, from being excluded from business to becoming in charge of their own. Based on my interviewees’ experiences, the NOI experience seemed to transform them into a black sphere associated with the ideology of a nation-state built upon the democratic concept of solidarity, kin-ship and religious equality. However, despite of their new Nation’s (NOI) foundation and reaffirming power, the tools which they used were anti-nationalistic and anti white. I believe that for many members, including some of my interviewees, these tools functioned as a psychological “pay-back time” to the white hegemony after years as a discriminated ethnic group. This “pay-back ideology” represents what Franz Fanon argued was missing when the slaves were released from slavery; the need to reclaim their dignity through fighting for it. Yet, despite of offering a re-psychologizing identity package, according to most of my interviewees their membership with the NOI, was just a stage, since they withdrew from the violent “white-hate side” which existed in the NOI. On the other hand, they view their conversion to NOI, as a necessary process, or even a “gateway” in order to be ready for the real conversion to Sunni Orthodox Islam (SOI). Many referred to the process as a cleansing process; removing the dirt, lies, victim role and dehumanization African-Americans had experienced throughout their history. Even today, as Sunni Orthodox Muslims, the majority of my interviewees affiliate with a particular black version of it, a branch which grew out of the tradition of the NOI. I believe the affiliation with a Sunni Orthodox Islam which can respond to the particular “Black experience”, still is important for the majori-

ty of them, even though this political engagement and awareness is not explicitly mixed with the religion. In line with this, a mutual respect seems to exist between the NOI and the SOI. Also in the prison system this tension or communication is seen. We have seen through the thesis, that even though a majority of the conversions are to Sunni Orthodox Islam, there are good arguments that the NOI make up for more members, than what is registered through memberships (even though they associate with them they don't want to register in fear of being stereotyped as criminals). I believe that the hatred towards the hegemonic injustice which infiltrated the NOI, played a strong role, offering a forum for the suppressed anger towards still on-going discrimination. The attractive elements within Sunni Orthodox Islam were based on a "universal" concept; the religion did not emphasize color, but rituals and universality, thus turning from a cosmos focusing on racial inferiority and superiority, to a world of dignity and value despite color. Even though Christianity in its theology is universal and show an integrationist approach in its "turn the other cheek theology," African-Americans became introduced to a Christianity which was so influenced by slavery and Eurocentric Christianity that black and white churches had difficulties in co-existing. A separation was needed due to ethical discrimination where African-Americans were limited from participating, and from human rights within the church. Despite the separation, according to my interviewees, black independent churches have been infiltrated by Eurocentric sacramental icons and white Jesus figures, and it was difficult for a black child to imagine that it was possible to reach up to what was presented as a white Jesus. Coming to church, they were already so influenced by the black/white mentality from the surrounding society, that the Sunday school stories felt more like dreams than reality. For those of my interviewees who were members of particularly black churches, other negative elements were underlined. Through the thesis, we have seen how these particular elements grew out of and have been characteristics of the invisible church, a syncretistic mix of elements from traditional African religion and Christianity. During the segregation, no legal rights were given the slaves the segregation lasted long after the slaves were freed, and the church had several functions, also as a rescue center and a social institution when African-Americans had been excluded from human and civil rights within the U.S social institution. According the scholars in the field, this has also made the church overwhelmed with own problems, making them stagnate and being limited due to political engagement outside the church institution. Rather, the focus on social activism through spiritual warfare have increased, and according to my interviewees it has become overemphasized, showing an escapism attitude, ignoring the still on-going discrimination.

Another criticism was based on the Church being “watered out,” having become less dogmatic and too secular. My interviewees were missing something to hold on to in a chaotic world, where the secular and spiritual values were walking hand in hand. This I believe is also due to the American civic religion. Despite the separation between church and state there exists a tradition in the U.S for using Christian rhetoric in political strategies (trying to reach to a diverse range of religions through talking a universal religious language, with a particular traditional biblical rhetoric). Through this appeal, Christianity might be limited to a God on the majority’s side, emphasizing on the promised land, more than the bondage in Egypt which is the way many African- American still experience daily episodes due to exclusion based on skin-color or stereotyping based on negative generalization. This presentation of Jesus might make a negative connection to the slave era, where Christianity was “limited” to the dominant elites’ dreams. In that manner I believe Jesus is presented as too “white” with its consequences attached to it. Despite the universal concept of SOI, there seemed to exist a tension in the mosques rooted in cultural differences. One of my interviewees pointed to how his physical appearance and style was criticized and not accepted in the Arab mosque. Others criticized how the Arabs were ignoring social problems and instead focused on materialism and luxury in the mosque. From some of my interviewees’ perspective, it appeared as though the Arab Muslims in the U.S were prosperous and achieving the “American Dream” and therefore could not empathize with African-Americans who had been held back from fulfilling the same dream by discrimination in the social structures.

The power of rituals seemed to play a strong role in all of my interviewees’ life where they all emphasized rituals strongly and prayed 5 times a day. According to one of my interviewees the rituals had the power to transform the negative energy to a positive one, and keep one’s system in control. This also brings us back to McGuire description of a conversion’s function-replacing a new one with new meaning system. On an individual level, I believe rituals can have a therapeutic function offering self-discipline, control, goal orientation. To my interviewees it functioned as a divine disciplinarian tool, helping them to increase their intimacy with Allah/God and finding the spiritual and social peace which they were longing for. The ritual of Zakat was for many a holy act which seemed to offer a feeling of holiness which they did not find in church. I also believe that the structure in Islam played a very attractive role. Compared to the Christian Church, mosque services distinguished between the different rituals giving them more clarity than the rituals in many black churches where rituals are un-separated than churches with a Eurocentric style.

The fact that Muslim tradition did not grow out of the tradition of euro Christianity (and its slavery history mixed with it), seemed to have a certain influence on the conversion. Having the possibility to start on an empty page without any references in mind to the whites or the slave religion seemed to be attractive. Despite of these arguments, some of my interviewees argued that converting directly to Sunni Orthodox Islam is like going from one slave master to another, a statement underlining that a Sunni Orthodox Islam growing out of the tradition of the NOI with a sensitivity to the “African-American experience” was needed. It enabled a re-defining of self from being traumatized through internalized discrimination to an individual who have claimed a new self with focus on dignity and self-respect. This particular point of view, can also be understood as the one who convert directly to the Sunni Orthodox Islam do not replace the old meaning system (which for my interviewees were infiltrated with negative factors attached to being African- American Christian)with a positive one. Meaning that Sunni Orthodox Islam from Arab traditions did not offer a complete wholeness through the rituals and theology attached to it.

This also underlines that being secure in its own identity as a group or individual and valuing itself, is an important factor with a liberating effect on a person`s psyche. On the other hand, why should religion have to deal with this particular socio-cultural therapeutic aspect? For many of my interviewees the NOI was the reason why they converted to what they view as the right version of Islam. But would they have converted to the SOI if they previously had not been affiliated with the NOI? The NOI played an important role and took responsibility of what many other social institutions seemed to ignore the traumatized “black self.”

It played a tremendous role in an oppressed people`s life, and had courage to describe the emotions rising from discrimination, followed by turning it into social action. It brings us back to what Gerd Baumann refers to as “The Multicultural Riddle,” where religion can function as a channel for civil and human rights and vice versa.

Despite disagreements, I believe that this gateway seemed to function as the gate of heaven for many of my interviewees. Finally, they could be seen and heard and be able to fight for their rights spiritually, socially and cognitively. Out of this we can also understand the power with which fundamental, nationalistic and non-integrationist profiled religious sects are able to attract especially diaspora groups, minority citizens without rights within their nation. Even though the NOI had an enormous capacity in their well structured agenda they failed

playing on hate and bitterness which might was a foundational simple way to restore self-esteem. However, all of my interviewees after all left the NOI disagreeing in their separationist attitude towards the American society and the white man. The time context has changed and I believe that an integrationist approach is what is considered as a politically correct instrument in today's time era. Considering my interviewees' ranking of identities in terms of belonging, they all viewed Muslim identity with greatest importance and relevance to their lives, followed by African-American identity, and at last; the U.S national identity.

Throughout the thesis, the African-American history, stories from my interviewees' childhood, church-relations, and experienced discrimination due to black stigma (both from an individual and institutional level) have been presented. My interviewees seem to have internalized the racist elements which have infiltrated these life spheres, creating a skeptical attitude to U.S democratic values, proclaiming equality in the midst of their experienced inequality. Ranking the African-American identity as number two on the list, might indicate the importance of taking pride and valuing their cultural and ethnic group as a unique diaspora nation which we earlier have seen as an important mental factor in order to integrate. It can also be a result of that majority of my interviewees going through the "do it for yourself movement" in the NOI, proclaiming a new self with dignity. Confirming Muslim identity as the most important identity mark in their life's, might indicate Islam as an important instrument in the process of recognized human dignity and self-worth among an oppressed minority group. It points to Islam as a tool of maximum freedom, not having to focus on the issues attached to being a black minority, but rather turning the focus to a religion which has a new way and its own way of life/ (the deen), including the structure which come along with the rituals.

In some ways Islam might offer the control which is needed in the chaos and confusion of a democratic melt pot nation, consisting of the mix of religions, history, cultures and secular values. This U.S Nation was originally established by white Protestants, proclaiming one universal God, striving for political goals (ignoring focus on the black experience), legitimated by Christian rhetoric. The crises resulting from the brutal African-American history seem to have influenced both the collectivity and individuality among the African-Americans. Mistreatment and discrimination has throughout the history influenced their position in society and made them as easy victims due to negative stereotyping, especially in the institutions of education and the criminal system. The high right of imprisoned African-Americans converting to Islam, indicate Islam as an important filter for integration.

Defending the validity of my thesis, my interviewees include people from different denominational Christian backgrounds. Despite all of them considering themselves as Sunni Orthodox, they have all converted to different types of Muslim mosques and organizations. My interviewees also consist of men and women in different ages. Even though most of them today are considered middle class, they all grew up in different social upbringings, and class belongings. They also present a broad specter within the educational field. Despite the diverse background of my interviewees they all more or less seemed to emphasize on the same issues- which I believe give my data and results validity. I experienced that a mutual trust was established during the interview setting, which created a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere between me and the interviewees. This, I believe, impacted the process and made them deliver a trustful version of their conversion story, which, make me consider my conducted information as reliable.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Oral Primary Source: Interviews

<u>“Name“</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Job</u>
1. David	Age: in his fifties.	Job: fire staff
2. Ike	Age: in his fifties.	Job: prison staff
3. Khalid	Age: in his thirties.	Job: teacher at IUPS
4. Charlie	Age: in his fifties.	Job: prison chaplain
5. Danny	Age: in his early forties.	Job: security company
6. Tee	Age: in his late thirties.	Job: private business
7. Hassan	Age: in his fifties	Job: currently unemployed
8. Kenny	Age: in his early forties.	Job: social worker and graduate student.
9. Lorraine	Age: in her sixties.	Job: government employed
10. Cathrine	Age: in her fifties	Job: nurse and graduate student
11. Aisha	Age: in her sixties	Job: university staff
12. Delana	Age: in her forties.	Job: nurse

Time and location for the interview conductions .

1. Interview conducted	Oct, 2007.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
2. Interview conducted	Oct, 2007.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
3. Interview conducted	Oct, 2007.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
4. Interview conducted	April, 2008.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
5. Interview conducted	April, 2008.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
6. Interview conducted	Oct, 2007.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
7. Interview conducted	April, 2008.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
8. Interview conducted	Oct, 2007.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
9. Interview conducted	March, 2008.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
10. Interview conducted	Oct, 2007.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
11. Interview conducted	April, 2008.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S
12. Interview conducted	April, 2008.	Indianapolis, IN, U.S

Oral Secondary sources:

Michael Sahir. Imam at 46 Street Mosque, Indianapolis, IN, U.S.
Kenny Howard, Indianapolis, IN. U.S.
Delana Ivy. Indianapolis, IN. U.S.
Aston Morgan, U.S/Jamaica/Norway

Appendix 2

INFORMATION LETTER

Dear informant!

I am a Master student in Religious Studies at NLA. *School of Religion, Education and Intercultural Studies*. I am currently writing a thesis on African- American conversions to Islam through qualitative research interviews. The project is entitled: "Conversion from Christianity to Islam in the African American Ghetto." I am interested in learning about the experience, p.o.v of converts to Islam, and the reason and consequences of converting. I hope that you will be willing to tell your story, and want to inform you about the following:

- Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. If you decide to participate, you can choose to refuse to answer any question, and you can stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study.
- The discussion will be recorded and transcribed, so that the information obtained from the interview can be summarized.
- The recording of the interview is a requirement for participation in this phase study.
- To protect your confidentiality your name or other identifying data will not appear in any tape transcript. Research records will be kept in a locked filed and the information will be kept anonymous.

If you have any question regarding this study, or would like additional information, please contact me at + (47) 48261882 or e-mail at: Elisabethharnes@hotmail.com. You can also contact my supervisor: Dr. Erik Waaler at + (47) 55540700 or at: ew@nla.no (Norwegian Teacher Academy).

THANKS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS INTERVIEW. IT`S HIGHLY APPRECIATED.

Sincerely,

Elisabeth Harnes

E-mail: Elisabeth Harnes@hotmail.com
Norwegian Teacher Academy (NLA)
School of religion, education and intercultural studies
Amalie Skrams vei 3
5036 Bergen
Norway

Appendix 3

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



Elisabeth Harnes
Kong Oscars gt. 67
5018 BERGEN

Vår dato: 31.08.2009

Vår ref: 18672 / 7

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

STATUS FOR BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

18672 *Re-defining yourself - "The Muslim way". Conversions from Christianity to Islam among African Americans*

Vi viser til tidligere innsendt meldeskjema for forskningsprosjekt som medfører meldeplikt eller konsesjonsplikt. Videre vises det til vårt svarbrev hvor det gikk frem at vi ville ta kontakt ved prosjektslutt angående prosjektets status.

Ifølge våre opplysninger skal prosjektet nå være avsluttet. Personvernombudet for forskning ber om en tilbakemelding på hvorvidt datamaterialet er anonymisert.

Dersom data ikke er anonymisert og det fortsatt er behov for oppbevaring av personopplysninger, må prosjektleder gi en redegjørelse til personvernombudet for hvorfor data ikke kan anonymiseres på nåværende tidspunkt. Denne tilbakemeldingen er nødvendig for at prosjektleder skal ha lovlig grunnlag for behandling av personopplysninger.

NSD arkiverer forskningsdata for fremtidig bruk. Dersom lagring av data ved NSD er ønskelig ber personvernombudet om at data oversendes sammen med nødvendig dokumentasjon og utfylt arkiveringsskjema. Vi viser til våre nettsider for veiledning www.nsd.uib.no/personvern. Forskere som gjennomfører forskningsprosjekt med støtte fra Norges forskningsråd (NFR) minnes om at arkivering ved NSD er et kontraktsvilkår for den gitte støtte (dersom data er egnet for arkivering ved NSD).

Vi ber om at tilbakemelding på status for behandling av personopplysninger gis via våre nettsider: <https://pvportal.nsd.no/statusrapport/statusrapport?sid=Hq83QsXi7t6L2jwTm54E>.

Vi ber om tilbakemelding innen 3 uker. Dersom noe er uklart ta gjerne kontakt over telefon.

Vennlig hilsen

Bjørn Henrichsen

Lis Tenold

Kopi: Erik Waaler

Harald Hårfagres gate 29, N-5007 Bergen, Norway.
Tel: +47-55 58 21 17. Fax: +47-55 58 96 50.
nsd@nsd.uib.no www.nsd.uib.no
Org.nr. 985 321 884.

Appendix 4

NORSK LÆRERAKADEMI OG NLA LÆRERHØGSKOLEN



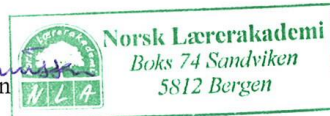
Bergen, 14th of March 08

To whom it may concern

We hereby confirm that Elisabeth Harnes, born: 11th of March 1978, is a Master's student at NLA School of Religion, Education and Intercultural Studies in Bergen, Norway. She is doing research for her Master's degree on Muslim conversions in an African American context.

Sincerely,

Morten Rasmussen
Morten Rasmussen
Consultant



Norsk Lærerakademi og NLA-Forlaget adr.: Amalie Skram's vei 3, boks 74 Sandviken, 5812 Bergen
Telefon: 55 54 07 00 – Telefax: 55 54 07 01 – E-post: post@nlh.nla.no – Internett: www.nla.no E-post: post@nla.no
Bankgiro nr.: 8220.02.88013 – Organisasjonsnr.: 951 127 302

NLA Lærerhøgskolen adr.: Olav Bjordalsvei 41, 5111 Breistein
Telefon: 55 53 69 00 – Telefax: 55 53 69 01 – E-post: post@lh.nla.no – Internett: www.nla.no
Bankgiro nr.: 8220.02.88102 – Organisasjonsnr.: 976 087 607

INTERVIEW GUIDE

For Elisabeth Harnes

1. Why did you convert from Christianity to Islam?
2. When did you convert to Islam?
3. What did the conversion do to your "Self-esteem/identity?"
4. How do you find Islam to be a rehabilitating system?
5. What does being a Muslim mean to you?
6. Do you have friends and family who also have converted to Islam?
7. How do feel Islam connects or disconnect with the African-American culture?
8. Statistics shows that conversions to Islam have increased rapidly in the US after "9/11th". What is your reflections regarding that tendency?

Appendix 6

Print

Close

Prosjektnr: 18672. Re-defining yourself - "The Muslim way". Conversions from Christianity to Islam among African Americans

From: **Ragnhild Kise Haugland** (ragnhild.haugland@nsd.uib.no)

Sent: September 3, 2009 9:16:23 AM

To: Elisabethharnes@hotmail.com

Hei!

Viser til forespørsel om utsettelse av prosjektslutt mottatt 31. august 2009.

For å gi deg god tid til å fullføre oppgaven endrer vi dato for prosjektslutt til 31. desember 2009. Vi gjør oppmerksom på at ytterligere utsettelse ikke kan påregnes uten at utvalget kontaktes på nytt. Vi viser ellers til tidligere korrespondanse fra ombudet.

Ta gjerne kontakt dersom noe er uklart.

--

Vennlig hilsen

Ragnhild Kise Haugland
Fagkonsulent
(Specialist Consultant)

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
(Norwegian Social Science Data Services)
Personvernombud for forskning
Harald Hårfagres gate 29, 5007 BERGEN

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Email: Ragnhild.Haugland@nsd.uib.no
Internettadresse www.nsd.uib.no/personvern

