Conversions to Islam: Personal Narratives of Muslim Women in Durban

by

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Preface

I spent the spring of 2013 in South Africa on a study abroad program with the School for International Training. Before departing for the semester, I had researched the history of Islam in South Africa as part of my final project in Historiography. This subject was meant to marry my interest in the global history of Islam with my interest in South African history. Having read repeatedly that Muslims accounted for only about 1.5 percent of South Africa's population, I was expecting it to take a considerable amount of work to meet South African Muslims. Much to my surprise, my arrival in Durban was marked by driving past almost a half dozen mosques in the city and suburbs, groups of women wearing *abayat* and headscarves out on the beach, and Arabic script scrawled across walls, billboards, and taxis. It appeared that I would not have to look very hard to find Islam's presence in the city and community.

My first homestay was in the predominantly African township of Cato Manor, located on the outskirts of Durban's city center. Just around the corner from my family's house was a mosque, and throughout the day the call to prayer could be heard from outside. Several Muslim families, of African and Indian descent, lived on our street. Before introducing me to the neighbors, I remember my Zulu-speaking host mother asked me if I had ever met a Muslim before. She was genuinely surprised when I explained to her that there were indeed American Muslims. The presence of Islam in this township, which had historically experienced hostile and violent relations between its African and Indian inhabitants, intrigued me, and I wanted to learn more about the history of racial and cultural plurality in the local Muslim community.

At the end of my study program, I completed an independent study project which explored the life histories and identity of white Muslim women in Durban. During the process of my research, I learned that my interview participants identified strongly with other women who had converted to Islam, and more so than they did with other white Muslim women. In a country where racial divisions were for so long institutionalized by law and custom, hearing that these women had built supportive and lasting relationships with women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds made me want to further investigate the shared (and particular) experiences and challenges of women who converted to Islam from a diversity of backgrounds. Wishing to extend my stay in Durban and expand upon my original research, I applied for and received funds from the Davenport Grant and the White Fellowship. This funding allowed me to complete my project on the life histories of women in Durban who converted to Islam.

Map of South Africa Highlighting Kwa-Zulu Natal
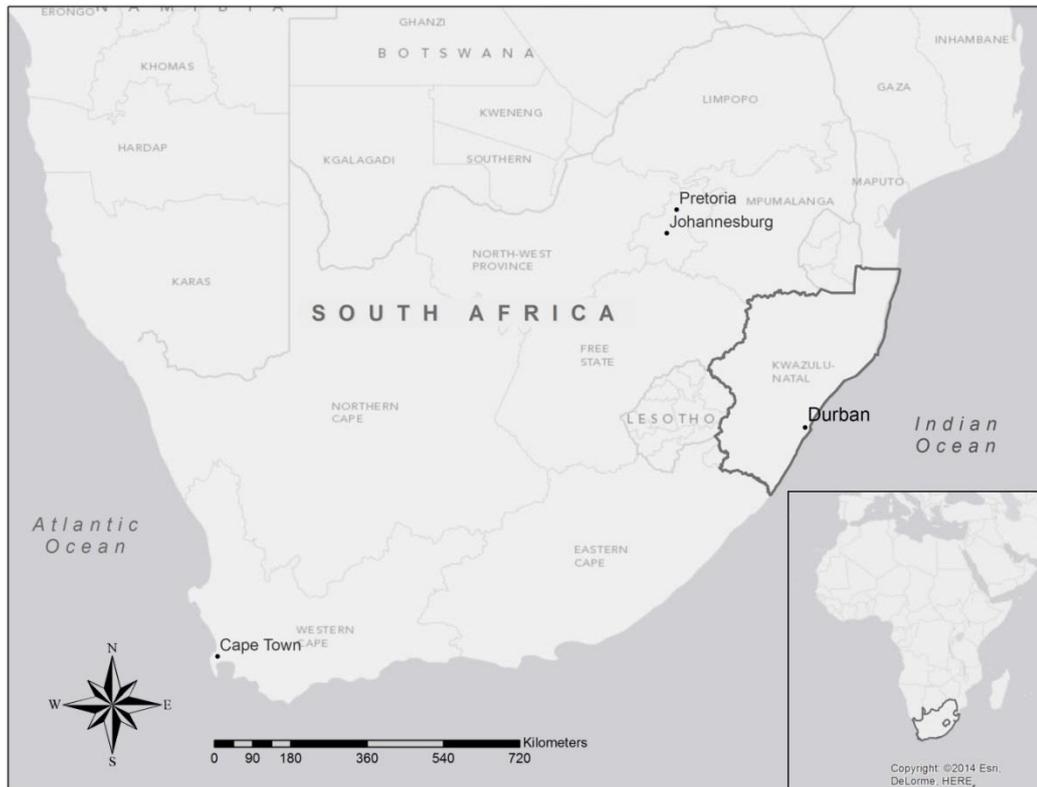
Akiyoshi, Sora. "South Africa" [map]. 1cm = 92 km. World Cities layer, Provinces layer, South Africa Administrative Borders layer, World Countries World Light Gray Base [computer files] via ArcGIS Online. Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University, 2014. Using: ArcGIS [GIS software]. Version 10.2. Redlands, CA: Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc., 2013.

Introduction

South Africa's history is largely colored by the region's diversity. This diversity, extoled by Desmond Tutu's vision for a "rainbow nation," can be found in the country's geography, socio-economic levels, languages, and material and religious cultures. South Africa's geographical location on the oceanic trade route system, situated at the confluence of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, allowed for significant inward migrations of people. The movements into South Africa of people from all regions of the globe during the period of oceanic empires had lasting effects on the composition of the country's population. Despite such celebration of diversity, modern South African historiography is generally structured by the narrative of how the country's black majority population came to be dominated and subjugated by a white minority under a system of apartheid. Such methodology has provided only limited insight into other aspects of the region's diverse history.

In particular, the history of the country's Muslim population is often excluded from this narrative, except as concerns their victimization by discriminatory policies. As is brought to attention by South African historian Shamil Jeppie, "the secular focus of historical studies in South Africa has meant that complex questions regarding religions and religious identity, seen in critical historical perspective, have been grossly neglected."[1] What this study investigates is the historical experience of women within South Africa's Islamic communities, in particular the personal histories and identities of converted women belonging to the Muslim community of Durban.

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[1] Shamil Jeppie, *Language Identity Modernity : The Arabic Study Circle, of Durban*(Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), 8.

This thesis is not meant to be a study on Islam, per se, though I feel a brief description of the religion is warranted for the purposes of this thesis. Islam manifests a belief that there is no other God than Allah, and that Mohammad is His prophet. The holy scripture of the Qur'an and the five pillars of faith – *shahada* (proclaiming commitment to the faith), *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (almsgiving), *sawm* (fasting), and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) – as well as the hadiths (the traditions and examples of Mohammad) and Sharia (the canonical law of Islam), provide the religious unifying framework for most Muslims. As do other religions and ideologies, Islam takes different forms and expressions depending on social and cultural context.

The Muslim community in South Africa, a religious minority group with a history dating back centuries, provides a unique case study of Muslim history and identity, and how a religious minority has responded to the country's social and political transformations while also confronting challenges to Muslim identity in an increasingly globalized context. Although South Africa's Muslim population comprises only approximately 1.5 percent of the country's total, it is representative of a diverse racial and socio-economic population, claiming members of South-East Asian, Middle Eastern, Indian, African and European descent.[2] However, discriminatory apartheid legislation served to compartmentalize racial identities, which inhibited transcendence of identity beyond one's racial classification, and cemented cultural and religious identities within these groups. Under this system of racial segregation, the fluidity of identity that can be found in South Africa today would be perceived as a transgression of prescribed racial boundaries. This codification of racial identity

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[2] Goolam Vahed and Shamil Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *State of the Nation: South Africa 2004–2005* (2005): 283.

had the effect of limiting the parameters of the Muslim community, which had historically existed as part of a broader multi-religious and multi-racial society in South Africa, to the confines of racial groupings.

Moreover, the legacy of apartheid's rigid racial distinctions has served to restrict historical narratives of Durban's Muslim community to the context of the Indian community, in addition to not allowing for instances of cultural exchange between Muslims and the broader population in South Africa. Recently, historian Preben Kaarsholom commented that "Irrespective of numbers, the histories, motivations and dynamics that have made different groups of South African citizens be or become Muslims constitute a hugely interesting field for research that has only been very partially explored."[3] Shortcomings in creating an inclusive historical analysis of Islam in South Africa can also be attributed to the very limited scholarship on the subject. Furthermore, many of the extant works relating to this subject are derivative of one another, which has also served to limit critical analysis of the history of Muslims in South Africa. Consequently, experiences of South African Muslims outside of the religion's racial majority, as well as those of Muslim women, have been largely excluded from historical narrative. This study aims to address this deficit by examining the ways in which transformations of social, political, and ethnic identity within South Africa's Muslim communities are revealed within the life experiences of Muslim women converts in Durban. Presented in this thesis are the life histories of eight such women, who have generously donated their time and energies to my research.

In recording the personal life stories of female converts to Islam in relation to their experiences coming into and belonging to the Islamic faith, I aim to create

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[3] Preben Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34, no. 4 (2008): 961.

a narrative which gives voice to these women in order to relate their unique perspectives on the history of Durban's Muslim community. This narrative is meant to explore areas of religious, gender, racial, cultural, political and social developments within Durban and South Africa, examining the effects of such developments upon local Muslim identity in Durban. The aim of this study is not to further reinforce stratifications within the Muslim community, but to demonstrate the importance of plurality and cultural transfer within the experiences of converted Muslim women. This project's findings offer insight as to how such instances of plurality arose despite the apartheid system's impediments to such interaction and exchange. Through this work, my thesis's ultimate objective is to provide a more complete understanding of Muslim women in South African society.

Methodology

Oral history is based on individuals' obvious memories and experiences. This method of historical research is an effective way to access the opinions and stories of people who might be ignored in the dominant historical record. Historians Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack assert that "oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds."[4] Of oral history collection methods, individual life story interviews are generally considered the most "wide-ranging," and "allow a person to narrative the story of his or her life in… personal, spiritual, social and economic [dimensions]."[5] This method of oral history interview allows for the liberty and flexibility necessary to create an opportunity for the

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[4] Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words : The Feminist Practice of Oral History*(New York: Routledge, 1991), 157.
[5] Hugo Slim et al., *Listening for a Change : Oral Testimony and Development*, The Panos Oral Testimony Programme (London: Panos Publications, 1993), 116.

interviewee, or narrator, to "tell her own story in her own terms," while also allowing the researcher to "preserve a living interchange which can be continuously probed for analysis."[6] Oral life histories allow ordinary people like my subjects to speak for themselves, fill historical gaps, and challenge stereotypes as well as validate their lives.

The interviews conducted for the purposes of this project most closely exemplify what these authors label as "single-issue interview," as my research sought to gain testimony regarding participants' experiences in converting to Islam. Research for this project consisted of a series of private one-on-one semi-structured interviews I conducted with research participants, the overall objective being to attain details of biography and religious history. Research participants were all Muslim women residing in Durban, who had either converted to Islam or were representative of a local organization which provides services for women converting to Islam. Language was also a limiting factor in the determination of my research pool. Although English is widely spoken in South Africa, especially amongst whites and people of Indian ancestry, finding African women converts with a level of English proficiency necessary for the purposes of interviews presented a challenge. Thus the perspectives of African converts included in this study are representative of the group's relative minority of English speakers. I made acquaintance with my participants through contacts provided by my study abroad program's academic director, Muslim organizations, and by recommendation of the converts themselves. This resulted in my participant group being limited to a certain circle of converts. Not all, but some of these

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[6] Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words : The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, 157.

women know each other, and have chosen public roles and are engaged in diverse activities and organizations.

The guidelines of my interview schedule encompassed a multitude of dimensions as relating to participants' life stories, including demographic details; past significant relationships and events; religious practices and beliefs during childhood and adolescence; the pre-conversion period; the period of decision to convert to Islam; the post-conversion period; and current beliefs, practices, and relationships. Each interview was semi-structured and open ended in order to allow interviewees the space and permission to explore and discuss the complexity and emotion behind their stories.[7] In implementing this more informal structure, I sought to avoid the sense of urgency that may accompany having a prescribed list of questions to address during the meeting. I felt also that a rigid agenda would inhibit the deeper discussion of personal experiences that can make oral history so rich in insight. Keeping with these considerations, I introduced topics which I had previously outlined in my personal interview guide with open-ended prompts. The responses provoked by these prompts would generally then determine follow-up questions relating to the events described by the narrator. Interviews lasted from one to three hours, were tape-recorded with the interviewee's consent, and were then electronically transcribed.

Although methods of oral history research can yield valuable historical insight and information, regarding memory and fact as interchangeable is highly problematic. In this thesis project, I apply the same critical approach to oral testimony as a historian would with any primary source. Dates and events discussed in interviews were cross-referenced with other historical sources and

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[7] Ibid.

works. I also locate individual experiences within their social contexts, in order to demonstrate interactions between participants and broader society. Regardless of the fallacies of human memory, participants' narratives are important in revealing individual perceptions of history and events, and serve to both enhance and challenge the historical record.

The challenges inherent in conducting oral history research were compounded by the additional cross-cultural and English language element of my research. My status as a young, white, educated, non-Muslim, American woman undoubtedly affected interview dynamics. As an outsider, I was received initially with a fair amount of skepticism, although I believe my position also allowed women to feel comfortable relating information to me without concern for the judgment that may have come from other Muslims in their communities. Gender is another inhibiting factor in oral history research, and I feel that my female identity also facilitated discussion of gender issues. Of the eight participants, only half considered English as their first language. Therefore, I cannot claim to be representing the authentic voice of all my participants, though I try as much as possible in my presentation of their testimonies to preserve participants' agency in constructing their own conversion narratives.

In the Appendix, I offer a short biographical representation of each women who participated in my study, in order to provide the reader a picture of them with respect to age, background, and how, where and when they first encountered Islam. Additionally, I have listed the dates of my research interviews. Quotes and information collected from participants during these meetings will hereafter be referenced by participants' names.

The names used in this work are pseudonyms. Because participants used their Muslim names during our introductions, I have chosen to use Arabic or Muslim names for pseudonyms. Unfortunately, this discounts discussion of converts' experiences relating to identity and name change in conversion.[8] Upon converting, each participant assumed a Muslim name, though most also retained their birth name, and choose to use either depending on their social setting. To assure a certain degree of anonymity, facts about background and particular recognizable distinctive features have in some cases been omitted or slightly altered to reduce, as much as possible, the risk of participants' identification. Participants Haifa and Henna were both interviewed solely in their capacity as representatives from the Islamic Guidance organization, and so any details of their personal life histories will not be presented. Appendix A also includes a table of key statistics on each participant for the reader's reference.

Organization

The particular history and expression of Islam in South Africa will be detailed in Chapter One. Although Islam is categorized as a proselytizing religion, missionary work has not been an integral focus of Muslims in South Africa, with the notable exception of the work of Ahmed Deedat, whose work will be examined in Chapter Two. This chapter will also outline the spread of Islam in South Africa, and present a history of Muslim *da'wah* organizations operating in Durban. The final chapter of this paper examines the personal histories of my

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[8]There is no obligation on any convert to Islam to change his or her name. However, the meaning of one's first name is significant. If a convert's first name is a word that is associated with something bad or forbidden in Islam, one is often encouraged to change it, though there is also no obligation to change it to an Arabic name. Most participants, aware that they could keep their given names provided they had good meaning, willing chose to adopt Arabic names at the time of their conversion. The rest had an Arabic name given to them by Muslim in-laws, which they only use when interacting with other Muslims.

research participants. These histories are organized thematically, with the

personal experiences and narrations of each women grouped under common

topics. In my conclusion, I discuss how the women's personal transformations

and identities reflect larger social and cultural transformations. Viewed from a

broader social context, their conversions to Islam indicate changes relating to

South Africa's unique social and political history.

Chapter One: Islam and Its Peoples in South Africa

Though often ignored by historians of South Africa, religion has been integral in shaping the country's history, society and politics. Undoubtedly, the rise and spread of Christianity in South Africa exercised a tremendous impact on the country, from its colonial foundations and continuing to the present day. Although Christianity remains the majority religion of South Africa, with almost 80 percent[9] of the population identifying as Christian, South Africa's 2001 census listed no less than twenty-six officially recognized religious denominations. [10] As it stated in the Human Sciences Research Council's report on religion and intergroup relations, "Fundamentally, South Africa is a society without a numeric majority; it is a society of minorities."[11] According to the 2001 census, Muslims constitute 1.5 percent of the South African population.[12] However, the conspicuous presence of Islam in the country and its history belies its minority status.

Though not considered as an "indigenous" religion in the region, Islam has a long history and tradition in South Africa, representing one of the country's oldest and most independent religious communities.[13] The spread of Islam into South Africa is very much unique when compared to the history of Islam on the continent. Whereas in other African regions, Islam spread with the expansion of

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[9] R.M. Byrnes and Library of Congress. Federal Research Division, *South Africa: A Country Study*(The Division, 1997).

[10] South Africa's most recent population census to collect national data on religious affiliations. The 2011 census form did not include any questions about religion due to low priority.

[11] G. C. Oosthuizen and HSRC Investigation into Intergroup Relations. Work Committee: Religion., *Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa*, Contributions in Ethnic Studies, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 58.

[12] Goolam Vahed and Shamil Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *State of the Nation: South Africa 2004-2005*, ed. J. Daniel, R. Southall, and J. Lutchman(Human Sciences Research Council, 2005).

[13] Robert Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Lee Pouwels(Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 343.

trade routes, conquest, and population movements, and was syncretized with local traditions in large-scale processes of Islamization, Islam's arrival in South Africa can be largely attributed to the activity of Dutch and British colonizers. From its arrival, Islam has represented a diverse, pluralistic, and vibrant tradition, though academic studies of the religion have tended to be integrated with those of South Africa's Coloured and Indian populations. This has served to undermine the experiences of minority groups and women within Islam and detracted from the possibility of an Islamic universalism that can be found within the diversity of South Africa's Muslim population.

The historical study of Islamic practice and identity presented in this section will be focused primarily on the KwaZulu-Natal[14] region and Durban, the location of my study of conversion to Islam. In racial and cultural terms, Durban is South Africa's most cosmopolitan city, a diversity which is displayed by the city's variety of foods, dress, customs, and the city's numerous churches, mosques and temples. The Greater Durban area is today home to approximately 90,000 Muslims, over 85 percent of whom are of Indian ancestry. In addition, there were 3,117 African Muslims, 3,497 Malay Muslims and 269 white Muslims residing in Durban in at the time of the most recent population census to collect information on religious affiliation in 1996, whose numbers have almost certainly increased in the interim.[15] Furthermore, Durban's Muslim population has a tradition of incorporation and interactions with the city's broader society. Such connections can be seen to have fostered a pluralistic and developing expression of Islam and

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[14] Prior to 1994, the territory now known as KwaZulu-Natal was made up of the province of Natal and the homeland of KwaZulu. For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to the region as "Natal" when mentioning the region prior to 1994, and as "Kwa-Zulu Natal" when referring to the region post 1994.

[15] Goolam Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2000): 44.

Muslim identity amidst South Africa's historical social and political transformations. It is within this context that the conversion narratives presented in this study took place.

Arrivals

The history of Islam in South Africa, which dates back to the seventeenth century, is very much unique to the religion's global history. As described by historian Robert Shell, Islam reached Southern Africa as "a coincidence of geography, colonization, slavery and the geopolitics of mercantile commerce."[16] The Dutch East India Company (VOC), serving as an unlikely agent of Islam, was in fact responsible for the arrival of Islam in South Africa. Ibrahim van Batavia, the first Muslim to reach South Africa, was shipped as a slave to their settlement at the Cape of Good Hope by the VOC in 1652.[17]   Although the history and experience of Islam varies between South Africa's Cape and the country's eastern coast, each reflect common themes of colonialism, integration and pluralism which are integral to understanding the complexities of the expression and identity of Islam in South Africa.

Originally established in the seventeenth century by the VOC as a refreshment post on their oceanic trade route to the Indies, the largely Christian Dutch settlement on South Africa's Cape came to be home for a conspicuous Muslim population. Ibrahim van Batavia was only one of the many Muslims brought to the Cape as slaves from Dutch holdings in South-East Asia. The Cape also functioned as a convenient place to exile both convicts and political leaders the company had deposed from these colonies, most of whom were Muslim. Amongst these political dissidents and convicts were several Islamic religious

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[16] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 327.
[17] Batavia was the capital of the Dutch East Indies, in what is now North Jakarta

scholars of note, labelled by historian Achmat Davids as "bandit imams," who were banished to the Cape along with their followers.[18] These Muslim scholars established their religious and moral presence at the Cape, and were responsible for the introduction of Islamic theology to South Africa. Their teachings and religious leadership attracted a burgeoning following amongst the colony's slave and free black populations, and during the nineteenth century the Cape colony experienced significant conversions.[19]

Muslims brought to South Africa's Cape came from diverse regions of the world, each representing a distinct culture. In addition to the Muslims brought to the Cape as slaves, convicts and political exiles, others arrived as indentured laborers and soldiers, from Africa, the Middle East, India, Ceylon, Malaysia and Indonesia.[20] In addition to the internal diversity of this early Muslim population, there was also a great amount of residential integration of Muslims with non-Muslims, particularly in the Cape colony's slave lodges. These lodges housed Muslims, Christians and Hindus together without segregation, and precipitated acculturation amongst the slave community. Muslims thus came to "imbibe various cultural traits" through direct interaction with their non-Muslim counterparts.[21] By the late nineteenth century, Cape Muslims were described as having "exchanged their mother tongue for Cape Dutch [Afrikaans]," and producing mixed Dutch/African/Asian bloodlines.[22] It is thus seen that instances of racial, religious and cultural pluralism within South Africa's Muslim population existed from the time of Islam's foundation in the country.

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[18] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 327.
[19] Abdulkader Tayob, "Southern Africa," in *Islam Outside the Arab World*, ed. David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg(Psychology Press, 1999), 112.
[20] Suleman Dangor, "The Expression of Islam in South Africa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1997): 141.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 338.

This diversity belies what has become a distinctive identity of Cape Muslims, designated by the term "Malay." The Malay identity came to encapsulate the ethnicity of Muslims at the Cape, regardless of their varied racial and cultural backgrounds. This identifier may also suggest that the source of Islam and Islamic tradition at the Cape derives from Malaysia, though several different sects of Islam, notably Sunnis and Shia, have existed at the Cape from the early nineteenth century.[23] The Malay community became one of the most significant groups in Cape Town, with an economic base in building and craftsmanship.[24] Under the apartheid-era government's system of racial classification, people identifying as Malay were categorized more broadly as "Coloured," which denoted a mixed-race ancestry.

In the region of Natal, on South Africa's eastern coast, it was British colonialism which was responsible for the arrival of Islam. In 1843, the former Afrikaner Republic of Natal was annexed by Britain. Due to a shortage of willing and available labor in the region's agricultural sector, the colony imported laborers from British colonial holdings in India to work on sugar plantations. This labor influx occurred in two periods, the first between 1860 and 1868, and then from 1874 to 1911. Over this period, 176,000 Indians were brought to Natal.[25] These groups were comprised mainly of indentured laborers, though later migrants came as independent traders and merchants. Of the first group of Indian laborers to arrive in Natal, it is estimated that approximately 7 to 10 percent were Muslim, whereas Muslims arriving in the later period comprised an estimated 80 to 90 percent of Indian immigrants.[26] Other religions represented in these

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[23] Ibid., 335.
[24] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 112.
[25] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 339.
[26] Ibid.

immigrant groups were Hinduism, which has continuously been the majority religion amongst South African Indians, and Christianity.

An Indian Islamic Tradition

Life as an indentured laborer was fraught with difficulties, from strenuous physical labor to the strains of living apart from one's family and homeland. In response to these transitions, the Indian indentured labor population of Natal formed a pluralistic community, transgressing a number of the caste boundaries which existed in India. This pluralism is perhaps best evidenced by the celebration of Muharram, a Shia Muslim festival which is held to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammed. In Natal, the Muharram festival became the first communal event to be observed by the indentured population, and was celebrated not only by Shia Muslims but by Sunnis, Christians, and a large number of Hindu Indians as well.[27] Although it was nominally a religious celebration, the atmosphere of the event has been described as a "carnival," and was "the one time in the year that the indentured from different plantations could come together [for leisure]."[28] This joint participation served to reduce ethnic differences between the indentured laborers and caused them to focus on their shared origins and history, in addition to creating a new common cultural tradition. In this way, the festival was important in "forging a pan-Indian identity" in Natal, which would be reinforced by the institution of racial segregation under apartheid.[29]

The "founding father" of Muslim practice in Natal is cited as being the Sufi "miracle worker" Shaykh Ahmad, who, after completing his term of

[27] A. Desai and G.H. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914*(Human Sciences Research Council, 2010), 223.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 48.

indenture in the 1860s, worked to establish Islamic practice in the area around Durban.[30] The later work of Sufi Sahib, who arrived in Natal in 1895, established a more lasting Islamic tradition in the region. In addition to spreading Muslim scholarship, this early religious leader remains known for his social work, which contributed to the foundation of a Muslim community. Because "impoverished Natal Indian Muslims were always at risk of being absorbed into the Hinduism of the other Indians among whom they lived, [Sufi Sahib] demarcated special Muslim folk festivals" in effort to entice born Muslims to maintain their faith.[31] Additionally, he established Muslim orphanages and several madrasahs, providing social services to the poorer segments of the Indian Muslim population.

Included in the later stream of Indian immigrants were traders and merchants who came on their own accord to establish business ventures, which expanded Natal's commercial economy. These immigrants had the financial means to fund their own voyage and were thus referred to as "Passenger Indians."[32] This group was primarily from the Indian province of Gujarat and occupied a higher socio-economic class than the indentured laborers. Most of these "Passenger Indians" were Muslims. As business and trade became the economic base of Natal's Indian Muslim population, the Gujarati group came to wield considerable influence over the establishment and functioning of Islamic institutions in the region, especially in the city of Durban.[33]

Religious life in Durban's Muslim community centered largely on the construction and, later, the operations of mosques. Mosques were at the heart of Muslim worship and congregational prayer, which provided "the means to build

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[30] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 340.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 260.
[33] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 112.

community spirit."[34]   However, Muslim women were typically discouraged from

attending services at the mosque, and were largely excluded from these centers

and institutions of religious community as the home was generally considered the

more appropriate venue for women's worship.[35]   As will be discussed later, this

did not prevent Muslim women from creating their own presence in the public

community. Islam's linkage to community groupings in Durban and Natal marks

a distinction from the imam-centered tradition established at the Cape. Natal's,

first mosque was built in Durban, on Grey Street, in 1881. Its construction

founded by Indian traders Aboobakr Jhavery and Hajee Mahomed Dada.[36] This

mosque, called the Juma Masjid, is said to be the oldest mosque in the Southern

Hemisphere, and until the late 1970s was also the largest in the Southern

Hemisphere.[37]   The nearby West Street mosque was built in 1885 by Ahmed Tilly

and Hoosen Meeran, and promoted a Deobandi literalist Islamic tradition.

Divisions between the West Street mosque and the mosque on Grey Street, which

associated with Sufi-inspired traditions, soon ensued, though over time divisions

have ameliorated as other mosques proliferated in the city.[38]   In the year 2000

there were 80 mosques in Durban, indicating Islam's conspicuous presence

despite its status as a minority religion.[39]   Mosque congregations and activity were

based on powerful mosque committees. The economic support given by the

Indian merchant class, along with their ties to the Hanafi school of Sunni-Islam,

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[34] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 46.
[35] Islamic tradition allows for women to worship within their household as a protective measure and with consideration for women's traditional childcare responsibilities. However, women's mosque attendance is not overtly forbidden by the religion.
[36] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 46.
[37] Ebrahim Sulliman, "A Historical Study of the Largest Mosque in the Southern Hemisphere, Namely, the Juma Musjid," *BAHons dissertation, University of Durban-Westville, and RC Jamal,'A Study of the West Street Mosque in Durban'(BA Hons dissertation, University of Durban-Westville, 1986)* (1985).
[38] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 46.
[39] Ibid.

led to the domination of Natal's Islamic institutions by a distinctly Indian expression of Islam. South African historian Abdulkader Tayob explains that "Indian culture, from the Urdu [and Gujarati] languages… to clothing and cuisine, dominated mosque ethos," which had significant and lasting effects on the development of Islam in the Natal region.[40]

A Common Country, a Separate History

Despite the diaspora of Muslims from both Natal and the Cape into South Africa's interior during the mining revolution and period of growth in industrialization from 1867-1948, in addition to instances of intermarriage, Muslims in the two regions remained largely separated by geography, class and history. Furthermore, separation of the two groups in the academic sphere has been perpetuated by the tendency of academic literature on Islam in South Africa to represent Islam as a religion of Coloured and Indian South Africans. Historians writing about Islam and Muslims in South Africa have positioned Durban as the locus of Indian Muslims and Cape Town as the locus of Coloured Muslims, drawing distinctions between the two largely along ethnic lines. Additionally, Muslims are often presented as residing solely in urban communities, and little attention has been given to Muslim identity and Islamic practice outside of South Africa's urban centers. Though such representation is certainly not without justification – 87 percent of South Africa's Muslim population was classified as either Coloured or Indian in the 2001 census[41] – it has come at the expense of considerations for the experience of Muslims belonging to other ethnic groups both within the two cities and in the country as a whole.

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[40] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 116.
[41] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 253.

Though this thesis does not presume to reconcile this issue, it important to establish a background of the history of white Muslims and black African Islam in South Africa. Although Robert Shell's work on the early history of Islam at the Cape refers to European converts to the religion, there is very little information available as to a history of white Muslims in South Africa. Whites have historically represented the smallest ethnic minority of South Africa's Muslim population, and the 2001 census recorded 1,036 white Muslims in Kwa-Zulu Natal. This is a significant increase from the 132 whites who identified as Muslim in the 1970 census, suggesting that a number of conversions took place during the interim.[42] Writing in 1985, researcher J.A. Naudè observed that meaningful contact between white Muslims and those of other ethnic groups existed only on a "limited scale," and cited the Moslem Dawah Society of Johannesburg as the only Muslim organization in a white community.[43] White converts are purported to be generally those who were "disappointed in [contemporary] Western civilization [and look] to Islam to provide their spiritual needs."[44] This could be taken to mean that whites who were disillusioned with the predominance of Christianity and its role in the apartheid state embraced Islam as a religion and way of life, though significant measures on the part of white Muslims to integrate into South Africa's broader Islamic communities have not been recorded. The final chapter of this thesis, however, will explore the personal experiences of three white converts living in Durban.

A more significant group which lacks thoughtful examination in the general narrative of Islam in South Africa is the country's Zanzibari Muslims,

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[42] Central Statistical Service Report No. 02-80-02. 1970. Population Census, 1970. Pretoria: Central Statistical Service.
[43]J. A. Naudè, "Islam in South Africa: A General Survey," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal* 6, no. 1 (1985): 25.
[44] Ibid.

whose history has been the focus of only several historical studies.   Another

misnomer in the description of a Muslim ethnic grouping, the term "Zanzibari"

refers to freed Makua-speaking slaves from northern Mozambique, captured from

Arab, Portuguese and African slave raids after the British forced the Sultan of

Zanzibar to abolish the slave trade in 1873.[45] British authorities decided that these

"freed" slaves, who were predominantly Eastern African Muslims, would be sent

to Natal as supplemental labor for the sugar cane plantations for five year periods

of indenture. In the period between 1873 and 1880, approximately 600 Zanzibaris

were brought to Durban.[46]

The Zanzibaris were treated as "African immigrants," and were granted a

higher social status than local black Africans. Essentially, the group was placed

"on the same footing as Indian immigrants," and the Zanzibaris developed close

associations with the Indian Muslim community.[47] Indian trustees of the Juma

Musjid Mosque took particular interest in the maintenance of the Zanzibari

community, and contributed funds towards their settlement's land, mosque and

madrasah school. Over time, the Zanzibaris were able to bypass incorporation

into the local black African population with regards to racial classification by

emphasizing their Muslim identity and espousing the notion that they were really

Zanzibari 'Arabs.'[48] Those who did marry into Durban's black African

population "retained their Muslim identity," even living outside the Zanzibari

community, which suggests an early infusion of Islam within the local black

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[45] Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, "Islam among the Zanzibaris of South Africa," *History of Religions* 31, no. 3 (1992): 305.
[46] Preben Kaarsholm, "Population Movements, Islam and the Interaction of Indian and African Identity Strategies in South Africa During and after Apartheid," *Journal of Natal and Zulu history* 24, no. 1 (2007): 50.
[47] Oosthuizen, "Islam among the Zanzibaris of South Africa," 306.
[48] Ibid.

African population.[49] During the apartheid-era, Zanzibari Muslims were recognized as "Other Asiatics," a subsection of the Coloured population. This classification serves as testament to both the formation of a distinctive Islamic identity in South Africa which superseded race, and to the absurd nature of apartheid's divisive racial categorizations. This classification also offers a partial explanation for Goolam Vahed and Shamil Jeppie's assertion that "Africans [in South Africa]… have historically viewed Islam as an Indian… religion."[50]

Though the Zanzibari and Indian Muslims often attended each other's social functions, "acculturation of the [two] communities was not very pronounced," and the Zanzibaris generally maintained their East African cultural and Islamic practices.[51] Their expression of Islam was influenced by traditional Makua and Yao[52] beliefs and practices, particularly in regard to ritual rites of passage and spiritual reverence of ancestors. However, both Indian Muslims and Zanzibaris observed Sufi practices such as *dhikr*, a form of prayer which involves constantly repeating the name of Allah, or supplications taken from hadith texts and Qur'anic verses, verbally or mentally "in order to attain [a spiritual] ecstasy."[53] In his work on the Zanzibaris of South Africa, Gerhardus Oosthuizen offers the following observation on women's expression of *dhikr*:

> Among the Zanzibaris, the women's devotional singing or *dhikr* is held on Thursdays and Sundays, at a specified home. The women seat themselves in a circle, after which they sway their heads and bodies rhythmically in African style (a procedure also followed in some of the Christian women's association gatherings, *manyano*). The Zanzibari women recite certain fixed phrases based on the name of Allah, and to-gether with the singing and the rhythmic movements, they often induce a semihypnotic state. Participation in *dhikr* has a therapeutic effect in a situation of insecurity.[54]

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[49] Ibid., 307.
[50] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 263.
[51] Dangor, "The Expression of Islam in South Africa," 146.
[52] Peoples of Mozambique and Malawi, respectively, belonging to the Bantu ethnic group
[53] Oosthuizen, "Islam among the Zanzibaris of South Africa," 313.
[54] Ibid., 314.

The similarities in practice and purpose between the Zanzibari women's *dhikr* and the *manyano* prayer groups of Christian African women are significant in revealing how African women created a space where they could assert their own authority in their expression of spirituality within both Islam and Christianity.

African women's organization of female Christian prayer groups, known as *manyanos*, in the twentieth century has had lasting effects on both the practice of Christianity in South Africa and women's active roles in the public and religious spheres. The *manyano*, established and directed by women excluded from formal authority within Christian churches, was characterized by "spontaneous praying out loud about personal and family needs," creating a public space for women to express their gender specific grievances and form a distinctive and cohesive identity as Christian women.[55] These *manyano* groups were active in both cities and rural areas, and continue in their popular followings to this day. As Deborah Gaitskell argues in her work on the historical significance of *manyanos* as a source of gender authority, "the emotional, participatory, expressive culture of the *manyano* was the choice and creation of the women themselves, as was its use as a vehicle of female spiritual leadership," representing women's assertion of their autonomy within male-dominated societal and religious institutions.[56] The Zanzibari women's *dhikr* groups reveal that such organizations were not limited to Christian women, and that Islamic practices also offered an extent of spiritual authority for women.

However, many traditional rituals and practices of the Zanzibari and Indian Muslims in Natal have been abandoned over time, a change attributed largely to

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[55] Deborah Gaitskell, "Devout Domesticity? A Century of African Women's Christianity in South Africa," in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall and International African Institute.(Bloomington; Oxford: Indiana University Press; James Currey, 2005), 185.
[56] Ibid.

the introduction of formal Islamic education through the establishment of *madrasah* schools following the turn of the twentieth century, and a more globalized interpretation of Islam was embraced.[57]

Islamic Identity and Divergence in the Twentieth Century

Prior to 1961, South Africans of Indian descent were classified as being "temporary" residents, and were denied educational opportunities in government schools after reaching the age of 14.[58] In Durban, Indian Muslims responded by establishing several state-aided schools in which religious curriculum was integrated into the regular academic curriculum.[59] For example, the Durban Anjuman Islam School attached to the West Street Mosque opened in 1909 with an initial enrollment of 150 students, 14 of whom were girls.[60]

These schools served to preserve a distinctive Muslim identity, as most of the alternative educational opportunities open to non-white students were provided through Christian institutions and missionary organizations. The Muslim schools used a uniform syllabus, and attendance resulted in "some measure of homogeneity in the expression of Islam in Natal," as Indian students from a diverse set of backgrounds were exposed to and educated in the same interpretation of Islam.[61] Influences on the expression of Islam in Natal after 1947 also came from educational institutions in India and Pakistan, where a number of young men from Durban were sent to qualify as *mawlanas*, a title of religious leaders.[62] The graduates of these institutions served as local *imams* and

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[57] Dangor, "The Expression of Islam in South Africa," 149.
[58] Goolam Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," ibid.20(2000): 54.
[59] Suleman Dangor, "The Expression of Islam in South Africa," ibid.17(1997): 149.
[60] Goolam Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," ibid.20(2000): 54.
[61] Suleman Dangor, "The Expression of Islam in South Africa," ibid.17(1997): 149.
[62] Islamic religious scholar

accentuated the predominance of Indian Islamic tradition in Durban and the use of Urdu as the language of Islamic instruction and interpretation.

By the middle of the twentieth century, a creole South African "Indian" identity had developed in Durban, inculcated by Indian South Africans concentrated residence in a few neighborhoods and their subjection to a common racism. That public hostilities and conflicts were "unknown" between Muslims and Hindus in the South African Indian community, even during the time of Pakistan's partition from India, signified the "highly localized" nature of Natal's Indian population.[63] Although the real income and commercial activity of Indians expanded between 1910 and 1950, discriminatory government policies limited their rights to land and their spatial mobility.[64] However, the greatest challenge facing the Muslim community in twentieth-century Durban proved to be secularization, demonstrating that internal divisions did not always derive from colonialism and apartheid.

In the 1950s, Durban became central in debates among different understandings of Islam. Shamil Jeppie's study of the Arabic Study Circle of Durban is an important work on the history of Islam in the city, providing an examination of how this organization came to challenge and influence the course of Islamic expression and identity in Natal. The Arabic Study Circle was formed in 1950, its membership consisted of a group of elite, educated and Gujarati-speaking Indian Muslims. At that time there were 79,000 Indian Muslims residing in Durban, representing almost half of the city's Indian population.[65] These men were set to "Arabize" the contemporary "Indian" strand of South African Islam, "[aspiring] to break the monopoly of Urdu-speaking [and Indian educated]

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[63] Jeppie, *Language Identity Modernity : The Arabic Study Circle, of Durban*, 29.
[64] Ibid., 21.
[65] Ibid., 18.

mawlanas… in providing authoritative interpretations of the Qur'an."[66] Another

important motivation for the group was to challenge the dominance of English and

Afrikaans Christian National Education in South Africa, and the Study Circle

sought to enhance educational opportunities for Muslim students, which was

accomplished partially through the funding of educational bursaries.[67]

Drawing on international influences from the Middle East and the West,

the group represented an Islamic modernism which sought to promote "a

contemporary approach to the study of the Arabic language… [and] of the religion

and cultural history of Islam [as a world religion]."[68] Over the five decades of its

existence, the Circle established and pursued as its primary goals the teaching of

the Arabic language, developing a modern and intellectual interpretation of

Islamic studies, and "promotion of the heritage of Islamic civilization."[69] The

Circle was host to numerous academics and religious scholars from around the

world, in addition to organizing festivals and conferences which served to connect

South African Muslims with one another and with Muslims outside the country.

These events created a greater awareness of Durban's connection to "a wider

'Islamic world'" among the city's Muslim community.[70] Furthermore, the

group's promotion of the study of Arabic was successful in reaching a broad

section of Durban's Muslim communities, and an "enduring impact [of the Circle]

has been the way in which Arabic studies became integrated at all levels of the

educational system," both secular and religious.[71] Indeed, Arabic remains the

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[66] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 962.
[67] Ibid., 963.
[68] Jeppie, *Language Identity Modernity : The Arabic Study Circle, of Durban*, 1.
[69] Ibid., 3.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 112.

most commonly taught language of *madrasahs* in Durban, including those operating in African townships as will be discussed in Chapter Two.

The group also recognized divisions within Durban's Muslim community in regards to descendants of traders and indentured laborers, Tamil and Gujarati speakers, Brelvi and Deobandi Muslims, and allegiances to the Grey Street mosque as opposed to that of West Street. The Circle's members "sought to negotiate or bypass these divides" through their discussions and activities.[72] Although the group was nominally "apolitical" in its mission, historians of Islam in South Africa have labeled them as "pioneers of Islamic resurgence" in the country, and forerunners of radical movements such as the Islamic Propagation Centre International, which will be examined in the next chapter, and the Muslim Youth Movement.[73] Additionally, the participation of, and support given by, women, mostly members' wives, in the Circle's activities prompted these women to form the Woman's Cultural Group of Durban. Not only were there numerous instances of cooperation, and even co-membership, between the groups, but the women's group also gave shape to a public and activist identity for Muslim women in Durban.

Although barred from positions of state authority, South African women had a history of participation in voluntary associations concerned with welfare, health and education. However, these organizations were largely the purview of white Christian middle-class women, and their emphasis on "welfare planning and provision" can be seen as an extension of the domestic focus of women's role in

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[72] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 962.
[73] Ibid.

the private sphere.[74] In their work on the history of the Women's Cultural Group of Durban, Thembisa Waetjen and Goolam Vahed present an example of how the civic organization of Muslim women created space in which they could publicly assert their "creative power and socio-political ideals."[75]

The Women's Cultural Group was founded in 1954 by a small number of educated Muslim women to promote women's involvement in the larger Durban community. Similar to their Christian counterparts, a primary focus and function of the Women's Cultural Group was charity work -with an emphasis on funding educational bursaries for girls and women - as a means of promoting development amongst all sectors of Durban's population. The group's activities encompassed much more than charity work though, as the women organized hundreds of cultural and scholarly public events over the group's fifty year history.[76] Although members of the Women's Cultural Group held limited "formal" power in the spheres of politics and custom, belonging to a voluntary association that they themselves created allowed Muslim women to redefine notions of their public authority. [77]   Through their activity in the Women's Cultural Group, Muslim women in Durban accomplished a reworking of formal notions of civic agency and identity which were assigned to both their gender and ethnicity.

Natal Jam'iat

Countering the more secular ideology of the Arabic Study Circle was the conservative Natal Jam'iat al-Ulama, launched in 1952 to protect the region's

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[74] Sheila Meintjes, "Gender, Nationalism and Transformation: Difference and Commonality in South Africa's Past and Present," in *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism : The Politics of Transition*, ed. Rick Wilford and Robert L. Miller(London ; New York: Routledge, 1998), 68.
[75] Goolam H. Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen, *Gender, Modernity & Indian Delights : The Women's Cultural Group of Durban, 1954-2010*(Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010), 2.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

Muslim traditions and represent the religious needs of local *imams*. The *ulama* were (and remain) committed to preserving Muslim traditions of the past and "[preserving] pre-modern religious discourse," especially in regards to the received order and authority structures.[78] "Creative thinking and the adaptation of Islam to modern circumstances," which had become part of the religious discourse amongst educated Muslims in Durban, was not supported by the *ulama*, and relations between the religious scholars and Muslim secular intellectuals were often contentious.[79] Furthermore, the religious body of the Jam'iat held the position that Islam was "at stake in the political vicissitudes of South Africa," and issues such as apartheid and racism did not register as a primary concern of the *ulama* relative to the preservation of Islamic tradition.[80] Furthermore, because the apartheid state did not impose restrictions on religious practice, conservative Muslim spokespersons argued that "if the government allowed Muslims the religious liberty to pray, build mosques and go for pilgrimage they could not engage in jihad (struggle) against [the state]."[81]

However, pressure by Muslim radical groups and a range of other organizations eventually persuaded the Natal Jam'iat to take an official stance on the apartheid regime in response to elections for the newly instituted Tricameral Parliament.[82] In what South African scholar Ebrahim Moosa describes as "an extraordinary occasion in its history," the Natal Jam'iat issued a statement proclaiming the elections to be "unacceptable because they perpetuated racism

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[78] Ebrahim Moosa, "Muslim Conservatism in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 69(1989): 81.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 76.
[82] In an attempt to mollify South Africa's Indian and Coloured citizens, the South African Constitution of 1983 established a three chamber parliament which would allow for the inclusion of Indian and Coloured representatives while still excluding the country's black population. Unsurprisingly, the legislation inspired further protest of the apartheid state, and elections for the parliament were largely boycotted.

and segregation," and deemed them to be by principle un-Islamic.[83] A representative of the Natal Jam'iat was even recorded in a 1984 interview describing the elections, and the apartheid state in general, as "Satanic and un-Islamic and an insult to human dignity."[84]

Throughout the twentieth century, the majority of Natal's Muslims accepted the authority of the regional Jam'iat, and adhered to the more conservative Muslim practices. This included Indian Muslim women's subjection to *purdah*, or social separation. Women's general contribution was to be the economic well-being of the household, which could also extend to participation in the family business, though the extent of women's influence in these ventures was not clearly reflected or acknowledged.[85] Muslim women were purported to have been "held in esteem" in the religious community, and polygamy, though permitted by Islam, was unusual.[86] During this period, it was common for Indian Muslim women to wear "distinctive Islamic clothing" with unveiled faces (a style of dress that was also typical to all Indian women), although Muslim men adopted Western dress.[87] Under the dominant interpretations of Islam as provided by the Natal Jam'iat, an egalitarian approach to women's position in South African Islam was severely limited, as "the overwhelming majority of religious leaders [resisted] any explicit change for what women may do inside Islam, even as Muslim women [made] progress outside the mosques."[88] Even today, Muslim female religious scholars in South Africa are rare, even though women have continued to play a large role in religious organizations.

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[83] Moosa, "Muslim Conservatism in South Africa," 75.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 113.
[86] Naudè, "Islam in South Africa: A General Survey," 24.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 113.

The Muslim Youth Movement

The 1960s represented an important period in the development of Islamic expression in Durban. Islamic revivalism manifested itself amongst all sectors of Durban's Muslim population. The majority of Muslims in the city had broadly embraced either the Deobandi or Barelvi traditions of Sunni Islam, which both draw heavily on inspiration from the Asian subcontinent and "lack… serious dialogue with the Western world and contemporary issues."[89] However, as political struggles over apartheid intensified and drew in Muslim activists, support for a more modern interpretation of Islam grew. Muslim intellectuals and professionals were the vanguard of this new movement, which also had special appeal to organizations formed by university students. Youth groups at universities adopted Islam as an identity which represented a circumvention of, and resistance to, apartheid's divisive racial categorizations.[90] Inspired by domestic precedents such as the Arabic Study Circle, as well as drawing inspiration from foreign revivalist groups like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat'i Islami of Pakistan, the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) was created in 1970 with the purpose of serving South Africa's Muslim community through education and advocacy.[91]

Headquartered in Durban, the MYM developed an indigenous focus, intended to address the needs of young Muslims during the apartheid era. This organization "appealed to the supra-national character of Islam against the classification of apartheid ideology… [and] adopted Islam… as an ideology with which to resist apartheid."[92] In this way, the youth movement represented a shift

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[89] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 47.
[90] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 118.
[91] *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement*(jutaonline. co. za, 1995).
[92] "Southern Africa," 118.

towards more direct political engagement. Additionally, the MYM was concerned with matters relating to the expression of Islam in contemporary South Africa and supported efforts to make the Qur'an "more accessible to all Muslims."[93] The MYM challenged the *imams'* hegemony over the expression of Islam and sought to transform the mosques into more public spaces and involve Muslim women in public religious life in addition to being active in educational missionary activity.[94] The group's agenda focused on a wide range of issues: raising awareness of Islam, socioeconomic development, achieving gender justice, and ending racial discrimination.

Activism under Apartheid

The apartheid system of racial segregation was introduced as official policy in South Africa following the National Party's victory in the 1948 general election. Apartheid legislation classified South Africa's citizens and inhabitants into four racial groupings: "Black," "White," "Coloured," and "Indian." Racial segregation of urban residential areas was enforced under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and so the majority of Durban's Muslims, being classified as Indian, lived in predominantly Indian areas. This created "value-strengthening conditions" in terms of the formation and consolidation of South African Indian identity.[95] In a continuation of earlier social relations, Hindu and Muslim Indians managed to "co-exist in relative harmony on both individual and communal levels, with mutual respect for each other's customs, beliefs and practices," though instances of syncretism between the two religious traditions did not develop as they had

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[93] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 47.
[94] Preben Kaarsholm, "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," *Africa* 81, no. 01 (2011): 113.
[95] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 49.

during the time of indentured labor.[96] In South Africa, the construction of Indian

identity involved a disregard for, and transgression of, class and caste lines as they

had existed in India. However, this identity was dependent on an Indian

exclusivity, and very little cultural exchange occurred between Indians and their

fellow South African citizens of European or African ancestry. Racial segregation

also served to minimize interaction and communication between Indian and non-

Indian Muslims, and, in an era where race was central in defining one's existence,

Indian Muslims existed within an "Indian" cultural, ethnic and racial identity.

However, apartheid's racist policies created conditions for broad political

alliances to be formed amongst organizations representing otherwise distinct

social groups. The 1950s Congress Movement included the African National

Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the African People's

Organization, the Congress of Democrats (an organization of white opponents to

the apartheid regime), in addition to the Federation of South African Women

(FSAW). [97] Since the majority of Muslims fell within the population groups

subjected to social, legal and civil discrimination, many Muslims became involved

in the anti-apartheid struggle for justice and human rights, "either in their

individual capacity or as members of liberation movements or political

formations."[98] With no political representation and limited national involvement

on the part of Islamic religious institutions, assertion of religious identity through

political involvement was left to the responsibility of individuals. The relative

obscurity of Muslims within South Africa's public and political sphere changed

dramatically in the 1980s, when the international media brought attention to

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Meintjes, "Gender, Nationalism and Transformation: Difference and Commonality in South Africa's Past and Present," 67.

[98] Suleman Dangor, "The Muslims of South Africa: Problems and Concerns of a Minority Community," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal* 13, no. 2 (1992): 375.

Muslims' participation in the anti-apartheid movement.[99] However, Muslims' political activity dates back to Islam's arrival in South Africa, and many Muslims were at the forefront of resistance and liberation movements before the apartheid era.

Muslims in Natal had a history of organizing to promote public interests of both their religious and ethnic groupings, beginning with their early participation in the Natal Indian Congress, founded in part by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894 to promote the civil rights of Indians in the Natal region. The class of elite, educated Muslims which had constituted this organization continued their political activity throughout the apartheid era. This activism was supported by a South African Islamic resurgence in the latter twentieth century.   Political scientist Lubna Nadvi argues that the resurgence was significant in that "the rise of a class of educated elites among South African Muslims was highly influential in ensuring that Muslim civic organizations played a central role in public life, despite being denied crucial political rights."[100]

South African historian Goolam Vahed recently produced a work which chronicles individual contributions of Muslims in the anti-apartheid struggle. Although the work is by no means comprehensive, it is significant that almost twenty percent of the individuals portrayed in the study are women, all of whom "were actively engaged in the frontline of struggle," and hailed from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.[101] The participation of Muslim women in the liberation struggle is significant in demonstrating the movement's transcendence of racial, class and ethnic barriers, as "the common cause of

[99] Tayob, "Southern Africa," 111.

[100] Lubna Nadvi, "South African Muslims and Political Engagement in a Globalising Context," *South African Historical Journal* 60, no. 4 (2008): 621.

[101] Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Durban, South Africa: Madiba Publishers, 2012), 13.

defeating apartheid required that such cooperation and unity [of race, religion and gender] was paramount."[102] One important figure profiled in Vahed's book is Fatima Meer. Despite being identified as Indian, Meer became a senior lecturer at the exclusively white University of Natal in 1956.[103] During the 1970s she worked in the Black Women's Federation, where she developed a close friendship with Winnie Mandela.[104] Although Meer's activism led to multiple banning orders for her, travel restrictions, and imprisonments, she continued her work in promoting social justice until her death in 2010. Her experience exemplifies how activism in the liberation movement allowed Muslim women to publicly assert their political identities in terms of both their religion and their solidarity with the broader South African population.

Na'eem Janeh credits Muslim women's involvement in the resistance movement as being one of the "main impetuses" for the emergence of Islamic feminisms in South Africa.[105] Women's activism in the public sphere legitimated the position and status of women as political issues to be addressed in the movement of national liberation. The ANC's call for a "non-racist and non-sexist" South African democracy in the 1980s helped to develop a national discourse in the 1990s on women's rights, generating "parallel developments in Islamic circles."[106] Several progressive Islamic political organizations acting in the anti-apartheid movement adopted and extended commitments to the advancement of women, notably the Muslim Youth Movement's establishment of

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[102] Ibid., 14.
[103] Naudè, "Islam in South Africa: A General Survey," 30.
[104] Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle* 13.
[105] Na'eem Jeenah, "The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa" (paper presented at the Women's studies international forum, 2006), 38.
[106] Ibid.

a women's council in 1993.[107] The MYM Gender Desk was coordinated by

Shamima Shaikh, who had previously been one of the first women to serve on the

MYM National Executive, and was a notable Islamic feminist and South Africa's

best known Muslim women's rights activist. [108]   In her position on the Gender

Desk, Shaikh organized workshops, seminars and campaigns in support of

women's rights in Islam and Muslim women's rights under South African law.

However, like their black African comrades in the resistance movement,

Muslim women view the term "feminism" as being problematic, representing

Western institutions and values that did not pertain to them. Janeh argues that

politically and socially active Muslim women have "engaged with feminism, even

if the label is rejected… articulating a discourse and struggle for the establishment

of women's self-worth."[109] Unlike Western conceptions of feminism, Islamic

feminism does not "put religion aside," and allows Muslim women to incorporate

their religious identity and beliefs in promoting gender egalitarianism by drawing

on the treatment of women in Muslim legal traditions as a source of gender

authority.   The experiences of Muslim women in maintaining their religious

identity while acting in the public sphere serve as an important predicate to

debates among Muslims post-South Africa's 1994 democratic transition, which

have centered increasingly on political participation and the public role of

religion.[110]

Transition and the Move towards Conservatism

Domestic and international opposition to apartheid came to a head in the

1980s, as an armed struggle between resistance groups and the apartheid state

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[107] Ibid., 36.
[108] Ibid., 38.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 110.

intensified and South Africa was subjected to economic and political sanctions imposed by the international community. Faced with widespread civil unrest and international pressure, President F.W. de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC and issued the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, signaling the beginning of transition to a universally democratic state. After years of negotiation, South Africa held its first universal suffrage general elections in 1994, which resulted in a victory for the ANC and the installation of Nelson Mandela as the country's first black president. Non-racial democracy resulted in massive social, political and economic change for South Africa, which precipitated countervailing trends amongst the country's Muslim population. On the one hand were Muslims who embraced the democratic government's commitment to social justice and building of an open and multi-cultural community and were actively involved in social affairs. Conversely, a significant portion of the country's Muslim population shifted towards a more conservative practice of Islam.

Since the ANC's electoral victory in 1994, Muslims have held a disproportionate number of positions in South Africa's representative institutions relative to their population size – at the national level this count includes four Muslim cabinet ministers, several parliamentarians, one Muslim premier, in addition to a number of Muslims who are active in local governments around the country.[111] However, these positions did not directly represent discrete Muslim interest, and many Muslims voted against the ANC in national elections.[112] The national policies of the ANC "did not support an Islamic world view, [as the new government] legalized abortion, prostitution, and pornography."[113] Although

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[111] Muhammed Haron, "Da'wah Movements and Sufi Tariqahs: Competing for Spiritual Spaces in Contemporary South (Ern) Africa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2005): 264.
[112] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 277.
[113] Ibid., 262.

national political parties were formed to represent specifically Muslim interests - namely the Africa Muslim Party and the Africa Moral Party – such groups failed to gain the support necessary to achieve representation in Parliament.[114] Not wanting to compromise their value systems, and placing religious matters as a priority over secular politics, some Muslims have avoided participating in South African politics and elections.

Moreover, the "African Renaissance agenda" of the ANC and affirmative action policies compounded insecurities within South Africa's Muslim community.[115] The removal of discriminatory legislation resulted in an increasing amount of interaction between various communities and sectors of South African society, and the breakdown of many institutional barriers of segregation. Muslims attempting to grapple with questions posed by this new modernity and social diversity felt a sense of vulnerability in the face of these social and political transformations, and turned increasingly to Islam as a source of stability and identity.[116]   Furthermore, Indian Muslims had become far removed from the migration experience. That 93 percent of Indian South Africans by this time considered English to be their first language, as compared to only 6 percent who reported to employ English at home in 1951,[117] indicated a break with their cultural past.[118]

Islam soon became the core of South African Muslims' identity, replacing ethnicity, language, class and region as the basis of personal identity. This occurred as Muslims grew concerned about maintaining an Islamic way of life

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[114] Ibid., 278.
[115] Ibid., 262.
[116] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 68.
[117] Jeppie, *Language Identity Modernity : The Arabic Study Circle, of Durban*, 23.
[118] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 44.

while integrating into South Africa's multi-cultural and modernizing society.[119]

Many academic studies of Islam in post-apartheid South Africa note a rise in

conservatism from this time, as more and more Muslims started "holding on to a

system of beliefs and practices that treat scriptural absolutism as the way to

counter the pluralism and relativism engendered by modernity."[120] As

liberalization swept over South African government and society following the end

of apartheid, a significant portion of the country's Muslim population began

demonstrating an increasingly conservative approach to the practice of Islam.

Over the past two decades, scholars on Islam in South Africa have asserted

the occurrence of a striking transformation in the growth of personal piety

amongst South African Muslims. Examples of this include "greater concern with

observing dietary regulations; televisions [being removed] from many Muslim

homes; and… a dramatic growth in Muslim schools," demonstrating also the

rejection of Western culture.[121] It is claimed that theological debates have almost

entirely disappeared from public discourse, and that "truth has become virtually

synonymous with the [conservative] *ulama*."[122] The growing number of South

African Muslims going for annual pilgrimage to Mecca is also reflective of an

increasing Islamic awareness, as well as suggesting growing connections with the

global Islamic community. In 1998, 8,758 Muslims from South Africa went for

the *hajj*, as compared to 4,000 in 1990.[123]   There is also evidence of a gender

counter-revolution amongst Muslim women during this time, even as gender

equality had become constitutional law.

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[119] Ibid., 68.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 262.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 53.

An important component of this counter-revolution was a shift in many Muslim parents' attitudes towards female education. Parents no longer thought it appropriate or desirable for their daughters to receive secular education.[124] The enrollment of girls – and boys, albeit to a lesser extent - in Muslim schools, which incorporate religious education into the secular curriculum, and Islamic schools, which teach Arabic, Urdu and Islamic jurisprudence, supplemented by English and math until Grade 7, increased from this time, particularly in Kwa-Zulu Natal.[125] Girls' limited access to education served to reinforce and perpetuate a conservative approach to gender roles in Islam.

Another obvious manifestation of conservative transformation was an increasing number of Muslim women wearing the *abaya*, loose fitting cloaks worn over other clothing while in public, and *niqab*, face veils, in the post-apartheid era. Traditionally, Muslim women in Durban have only covered their heads and shoulders with a headscarf, which could be worn with Indian or Western styles of dress, and until 1994 it was "a rare sight to see a woman covering her face."[126] However, the increasing occurrence of women adopting the veil was seen by many in the Islamic community as being indicative of women's changing and more public lifestyle. As one *mawlana* from Durban explained in 2000, "our mothers did not go to the gym, university, shopping malls, beachfront, discos and so on. They remained at home. Today's women go all over the place," and the veil has thus become a necessary expression of piety.[127] Despite what the conservative *ulama* decree as proper practice, referring to the veil as a necessity does not accurately depict the reality of many Muslim women in South Africa.

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[124] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 271.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," 51.
[127] Ibid.

Indeed, over the past twenty years, Muslim women, both veiled and not, have become more visible in public places than Muslim women of the previous generation.[128]

This increased public presence has meant that women became more prominent participants in worship at mosques. While in the past, women's place of worship was confined largely to the home and mosques did not offer any accomodations for women, from the late 1990s most mosques in and around Durban began to include women in their activities.[129] This was reflective of a broader trend amongst South Africa's Islamic community, as Shamima Shaikh's "Women in the Mosque" campaign gained national recognition in 1993 through the mobilization of Muslim women to attend Friday prayer services in Johannesburg. Mosques in Durban now permit women to attend services, usually in a room or area separate from men, in addition to running special programs for female members of the congregation. *Dhikr* sessions, Islamic education classes and public lectures are held at various hours for women's convenience, and so that they may bring along small children.[130] Such offerings are justified by male religious authorities in that women's role as mothers requires them to "[possess] appropriate Islamic knowledge" in order to impart Islamic values with their children.[131]

However, these programs often meant much more to the women who participated in them. In Goolam Vahed's interviews with women from an adult education class run through a Durban mosque in 2000, respondents revealed that

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128 Ibid., 52.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.

the program fostered the formation of a small community amongst the women.[132]

According to one respondent:

> [The] unity of the group was different to that of a family. Family bonds are forced on you. You don't have a choice. This is a special bond. We give each other lifts, we make social calls, we help anyone who has problems, we have a close and genuine bond. We do not want anything in return.[133]

These relationships are significant in revealing ways in which women continue to find spaces in which to create a gendered religious expression and to develop their own intimate community within Islam, similar to the *dhikr* groups discussed earlier. More recently, feminist Muslim organizations such as the Institute for Learning and Motivation – South Africa (ILM-SA), founded in Durban in 2006, have created programs for the advancement of women's religious instruction as well as promoting Muslim women's contributions to academia, politics, social welfare and the arts. ILM-SA's increasing membership, which connects Muslim women of different races and geographical locations across South Africa, points to advances towards gender equality both within the Muslim community and broader South African society.

South Africa's 2004 election marked several important developments in the national Muslim community. First was the absence of debate over whether Muslims were "permitted to participate in the democratic process," although for the first time there was no Muslim party on the ballot.[134] In another deviation from usual patterns, Muslims voted in large numbers in support of the ANC.[135] This was attributed to both domestic developments, such as the decade of relative stability and economic prosperity for the middle class following the ANC's

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[132] Ibid., 61.
[133] Ibid., 62.
[134] Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 278.
[135] Ibid.

coming to office, in addition to the ANC's response of global developments. Although events since 9/11 gave rise to Islamophobia in many areas of the world, South Africa's *ulama* "regularly acknowledged the absence of such [negative sentiments] locally," recognizing the South African government's independent stance on world issues.[136] Over time, many of South Africa's religious leaders have come to advocate for and support the ANC.

The history of Islam in South Africa has constantly evolved, as various individuals, institutions, social and political movements, and local and global traditions contributed to the diversity the country's Muslim population, and their expressions of Islamic faith. The narratives presented in this thesis will converge with, and reflect, broader trends of transformation within South Africa's recent history, as social and institutional barriers to religious and cultural exchange have given way to an inclusive and non-racial democracy.

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[136] Ibid.

Chapter Two: Islamic Proselytism in South Africa and Conversion Studies

La ilaha il-Allah
(There is no god but God)
Muhammadun rasoolu Allah
(Muhammad is the messenger of God)

The Qur'an states that "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong."[137] It follows that conversion to Islam is a personal experience, a decision made on the individual level. However, Islam is a proselytizing religion, and Muslims are encouraged to practice *da'wah*. Literally, *da'wah* is "making an invitation," and is the practice of spreading the message of the Qur'an to all people. Once an individual makes the decision to accept Islam, he or she is believed to "revert" back to the original, or pure, faith, as established by the Prophet Abraham.[138] The standard ritual of conversion in Islam is not elaborate, involving only that one recite the *shahada*, the declaration of faith in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet, which is formally done in the presence of two witnesses.

As the history of Islam's introduction to South Africa is unique to the African continent, so is the history of Islamic conversion within the country. In the rest of Africa, the agents of conversion to Islam were often political leaders, such as chiefs and kings, or traders, teachers, and holy men. The circumstances of the conversions mostly related to the "consolidation, retention, and/or legitimizing of political power and authority," in addition to gaining access to, and

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[137] Qur'an 2:256
[138] The terms "convert" and "revert" may be used interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, I will use the term "convert" except in instances when an individual self-identifies as a "revert."

accumulating, resources. [139] In South Africa, such structural factors were not relevant to the spread of Islam. Apart from religious and political leaders exiled to the Cape from Southeast Asia, there were no local African leaders or chiefs who embraced Islam and subsequently paved the way for the conversion of their people. Furthermore, European colonization in southern Africa "occurred in tandem with Christian missionary work" from the eighteenth century, which effectively blocked the advance of Islam southwards to what would become South Africa.[140]

Historically, conversions to Islam in the South Africa have been spotty. After a period of exceptional growth at the Cape during the nineteenth century, conversion primarily occurred only in instances of intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims. While South Africa's Muslim population remained concentrated in the urban centers of Cape Town and Durban, Christian missionaries from Europe and America spread throughout the country, and were successful in attracting converts. Christian institutions also came to dominate the country's social and political power structures, as minority religions were relegated to marginal positions of influence. However, the rise of modern and globalized approaches to the interpretation and expression of Islam in Durban in the mid-twentieth century, particularly as promoted by the Arabic Study Circle, projected Islam into the public sphere, and set the stage for the founding of Islamic missionary organizations such as Ahmed Deedat's Islamic Propagation Center. The activities of such groups served to promote the public propagation of Islam in Durban.

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[139] Shahid Vawda, "The Emerging of Islam in an African Township," *Al-'Ilm: Journal of the Centre for Research in Islamic Studies* 13(1993): 536.
[140] Ibid.

Islam was no longer restricted to the minority grouping of Indian and Zanzibari Muslims in Durban, and the religion's teachings began to spread among the various ethnic/racial communities in Durban. Islamic organizations offered services for converts, such as Qur'anic studies classes, which drew female converts in particular into the broader Muslim community. Conversion, being a matter of both "faith and affiliation… implies the at least nominal acceptance of religious actions or beliefs," as well as "the acceptance of a new locus of self-identification [and] new, though not necessarily exclusive, reference point for one's identity."[141] Examination of conversions to Islam over time and amongst different population groups in South Africa is important in developing an understanding of the history of Islam in the country. The founding of *da'wah* organizations and the conversions which have taken place over the past forty years in Durban demonstrate the evolving composition, attitudes, and configuration of, and challenges to, the city's Muslim community and the formation of Islamic identity in South Africa.

Early Conversion Narratives

Studies of conversions to Islam in South Africa have focused primarily on early examples from the Cape colony during the nineteenth century. During this time, Islam attracted a significant and diverse number of followers, and the Cape Muslim community grew at a rate which made this period an exception for the expansion of Islam in South Africa. In 1800, Cape Town's Muslim population numbered less than 1,000. By 1820, this number had grown to 3,000, and by 1840 the Muslim community numbered 6,400, at which point the Muslim population accounted for approximately a third of the city's total, and imams were attracting

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[141] John Edwin Mason, "'A Faith for Ourselves': Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape," *South African Historical Journal* 46, no. 1 (2002): 14.

more converts at the Cape than European Christian missionaries.[142] An examination of the conversions which occurred during this period is important in demonstrating the significance of spirituality within historical narratives relating to conversion.

The institution of slavery generated multiple pathways to Islamic conversion on the Cape. English records dating back to the 1770s make note of "Muslim sympathies" exhibited by the Cape colony's slave population, describing regular meetings hosted by a free Muslim and attended by slaves during which they would recite from the Quran.[143] From the VOC's founding of the Cape colony in 1652 until the British capture of Cape Town in 1795, "the public expression of Christianity was… monopolized by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)."[144] Although the VOC instituted the policy of baptizing its own slaves born in South Africa, settler owned slaves – which comprised the majority of the slave population – were far more likely to be excluded from Christian proselytization. This owed largely to the precepts of the DRC that once baptized, slaves could claim legal and social equality, and that Christian slave owners would not be allowed to sell their Christian slaves. In addition, racist beliefs prevalent among the white Europeans that Africans and Asians were inferior and led them to exclude non-Europeans from their religious space.[145] Denied access to Christianity, many slaves subsequently turned to Islam to fulfill their desire for religious faith, guidance and community.

Personal records of Methodist missionaries from the early nineteenth century, seeking to explain converts to Islam, stated that "some religion [a slave]

[142] Ibid., 4.
[143] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 330.
[144] Richard H Elphick and Thomas Rodney Hope Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, vol. 55(University of California Pr, 1997), 2.
[145] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 331.

must have, and he is not allowed [by his master] to turn Christian," which left slaves "to seek a faith for [themselves]."[146] Islam proved the faith most accommodating to the slave population. Unlike the white Christians, local Islamic leaders, mostly of Asian descent, welcomed slaves into their faith and treated them as religious equals.[147] Conversion to Islam allowed slaves, who were subjected to systematic degradation and social exclusion, to gain a sense of dignity and social identity.[148] Islam proved to have broader appeal amongst the urbanizing Cape Town population, as it continued to spread even after the abolition of slavery in 1833 and attracted converts from a range of social demographics. The religion offered people of African, English, Scottish, Welsh and mixed ancestry acceptance into an established and pluralist community, and syncretism flourished between 1843 and 1855.[149]

It is also noteworthy that the majority of Muslim converts during this time period were women.   Until the end of slavery, Muslim women at the Cape held only a marginalized position within the religion. They could not attend services at the mosque, nor attend funerals with men, and did not actively participate in marriage ceremonies.[150]   Nonetheless, syncretic customs which took hold in the Cape Muslim community served to promote a larger role for women in religious practices, such as placing women on "more equal footing" with men in wedding ceremonies and centering wedding receptions on the bride, and inviting women into the mosque for the *rampies sny* ritual, in which they packed aromatic sachets

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[146] Mason, "'A Faith for Ourselves': Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape," 7.
[147] Ibid., 5.
[148] Ibid., 13.
[149] Robert C.-H. Shell, *From Rites to Rebellion: Islamic Conversion, Urbanization, and Ethnic Identities at the Cape of Good Hope, 1797 to 1904*, 1993 (1993), 409.
[150] Ibid., 436.

to present to suitors.[151] Many women who converted to Islam were attracted by the "security and sobriety" of those who follow the faith.[152] Converted women, many of whom were of European descent, often entered into interracial marriages with Muslim men. Such partnerships were considered attractive as Muslim men "[knew] not billiards and brandy, the two diseases of Cape Town."[153]

The appeal of joining the Cape's Muslim community has been viewed by many historians as primarily pragmatic, a means for slaves and other marginalized social groups, such as women, to achieve social and welfare gains. Conversion to Islam entitled slaves at the Cape an opportunity to "overcome their economic marginality and racial exclusion," by attaining a higher social status, finding a community with which to identity, marrying a Muslim spouse, and becoming eligible for the solemn rites given the Muslim dead.[154] Robert Shell refers to the "cradle-to-the-grave range of social services" provided to those of the Cape Muslim community, citing them as the main impetus for conversion.[155] Furthermore, slaves belonging to Muslims who embraced the Islamic faith were entitled to manumission upon the death of their owner, another attribute of conversion which appealed to the Cape's slave population. Though such benefits were sure to have had influence on one's decision to convert, placing an emphasis on solely pragmatic concerns serves to undermine the spiritual experience of converts.

Conversion to a new religious faith occasions dramatic change in a person's life, as the phenomenon of conversion brings great changes in one's

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[151] Ibid., 449.
[152] Ibid., 448.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Mason, "'A Faith for Ourselves': Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape," 13.
[155] Shell, *From Rites to Rebellion: Islamic Conversion, Urbanization, and Ethnic Identities at the Cape of Good Hope, 1797 to 1904*, 415.

ideological affiliations, beliefs, social ties, and lifestyle.[156] Faith and affiliation

with a new religious community provide converts with guidance, sympathy, and

fellowship. Historian John Mason has argued that spiritual faith, as expressed

through practices of Sufism amongst Muslim converts at the Cape, played a vital

role in their embracing Islam.[157] Chief among these practices is the *ratiep* or

kalifa (which is called the *dhikr* in other Muslim societies), a mystical ceremony

in which participants enter a trance-like state in order to transcend the physical

world and commune with God and experience a "spiritual reality."[158] What was

commonly referred to by non-Muslims at the Cape as "Malay magic," a spiritual

ability to heal the sick and transcend physical pain, drew many converts to the

religion.[159] Instances of these practices were documented by numerous European

visitors to Cape Town during the mid-nineteenth century, and the popularity of

spiritual ceremonies amongst the Cape Muslims suggests that such expression of

spirituality was an important and attractive part of Islamic religious practice

during this time.

The prevalence of mysticism in the practice of Islam on the Cape declined

during the latter half of the nineteenth century, as more orthodox interpretations of

the faith began to take hold. The movement towards orthodoxy is largely

attributed to the influence of Sheikh Abu Bakr Effendi, a Kurdish Islamic scholar

who was sent to the Cape in 1862 on a missionary expedition sponsored by Queen

Victoria. Although Abu Bakr's mission was not itself a success, resulting in only

one congregation and the establishment of a school in Cape Town, his presence

and teachings served to permanently refocus Muslims at the Cape onto the wider

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[156] Michael Mumisa, "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2002): 275.
[157] Mason, "'A Faith for Ourselves': Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape," 13.
[158] Ibid., 7.
[159] Ibid., 15.

world of Islam.[160] Local imams began promoting a more orthodox expression of

Islam and discouraging syncretic customs and mysticism. As a result of the

movement towards religious conservatism, Islam's popular appeal declined, along

with the number of converts to the religion.[161] This decline indicates that

syncretism and spirituality represented important factors in Islam's appeal to

converts.

 During the same time, a parallel movement towards orthodoxy was taking

place in Durban.   Upon his arrival in the city in 1895, Sufi Sahib "disdainfully

noted that the Indian Muslims… had deviated from correct Islamic practices and

observances," having developed practices and customs syncretic with

Hinduism.[162] In attempt to rectify this situation, Sufi Sahib pioneered the

propagation of orthodox Islam among the indentured laborers in Durban.

However, no study has suggested that his work had any effect on the rate of

conversion to Islam.   Those who married into the predominantly Indian Muslim

community were usually also of Indian ancestry, and are purported to have

integrated their own ethnic customs into their religious observance.[163]

 Although the Muslim population of Durban was not as racially diverse as

that of the Cape, there is evidence of interracial marriages between Muslims and

those of other religious backgrounds. Notably, Fatima Meer's biological mother,

Rachel, was white of Jewish and Portuguese descent, and converted to Islam upon

marrying Meer's Indian Muslim father at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Meer explains that after her mother's marriage, "it was as though her ancestral

roots never existed. She was given [a Muslim] name, became a dedicated Muslim,

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[160] Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," 338.
[161] Mason, "'A Faith for Ourselves': Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape."
[162] Dangor, "The Expression of Islam in South Africa," 146.
[163] Ibid.

spoke fluent Gujarati and affirmed the Indian customs of [Meer's] home."[164] In

this instance, Meer's mother not only adopted her husband's religion, but also his

ancestral culture.

The experience of Rachel Meer also serves to demonstrate how the

expression of Islam in Durban was dominated by Indian traditions. The majority

of the converts interviewed for this project affirmed that Islam remains

synonymous with Indian culture in Durban. Converts in the city thus face

pressure to adopt Indian cultural practices as well as the Islamic faith in order to

assimilate into Durban's Muslim community. In her study of Dutch women who

converted to Islam, Margot Badran points out that "converts confront the question

of 'culture versus Islam'" when they begin living as Muslims.[165] The women

interviewed for Badran's study, who had converted to Islam, "knew there was

freedom in the religion and pressure in the culture," and considered it important to

be able to separate Islam as a religion from other cultural practices.[166]

In her experience, Aleemah, who is of British, and French ancestry,

describes some of the challenges which non-Indian converts to Islam in Durban

faced in regards to reconciling their cultural and religious identities:

> When I became Muslim, mixing culture and faith, even when I became
> Muslim [in 1988], to be Muslim you had to be Indian. I needed to wear
> *Punjabis* [salwar suits[167]], and I needed to know how to cook the Indian
> food, and I needed to know how to do certain things. It took me a good
> ten years or more, before I eventually said to myself, "I am not Indian," I
> do not have to dress that way, I look ridiculous in all of these bright colors,
> because I am so incredibly white, and I can still be who I am and Muslim

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[164] Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle* 235.

[165] Margot Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," in *Women Embracing Islam : Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk(Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 210.

[166] Ibid.

[167] The Punjabi Salwar Suit is worn in the Punjab in India and Pakistan. It consists of a head scarf, kameez, and the salwar when worn by women. The head scarf can be of varying lengths. The kameez is made up of two rectangular pieces sewn together with side slits, similar to a tunic. The salwar is similar to pajamas or pants, wide at the top and tightened around the ankles with hard material, called paunchay.

at the same time. Which unfortunately, especially in this country, and you will find even black Muslims will tell you this, that the Indian, Indian-ness, the Indian culture is always implicit in being Muslim here.

Navigating between religious tenets and cultural practices is a challenge shared by women converting to Islam in different settings. What made the experiences of converted women in Durban unique were the strong ties between Indian culture and Muslim identity in the city. Though Aleemah eventually regained her sense of self and was able to discern her personal identity as a Muslim, non-Indian women who converted to Islam faced pressure from Muslim organizations, Muslim in-laws (if they were married to an Indian Muslim), and other members of the Muslim community to adopt Indian cultural practices in addition to their new faith. Aleemah views this pressure as biased against women, saying that "across the board with all the white [converted] women I know, [the woman] is expected to do far more for her husband's family, though the husband will not do the same for hers."

The women interviewed for this study agreed that being educated in Islam represented the best solution to reconciling questions relating to cultural practices and religion, as their study of the religion imparted an understanding of Islam as a universal religion which can be devoutly observed by people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Ahmed Deedat and Da'wah Organizations

The predominance of Indian influence on the establishment and practice of Islam in Durban resulted in Islam being largely perceived as an "Indian religion" by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and despite the universalist teachings of Islam.[168] This perception fostered an insular and racially restricted Muslim

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[168] Mumisa, "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi," 288.

community. The separation of Islam as an Indian religion was pronounced even more by South Africa's institution of racial segregation, and mosques were largely confined to Indian residential areas. Similarly, Christianity was viewed as a white religion, though Christian proselytization in the country was widely successful amongst the African population. During the twentieth century, black members became the majority in most Christian denominations, and the total number of black Christians in South Africa grew to outnumber whites.[169] However, the leadership and control of all South African Christian denominations, save for the African Initiated Churches (AICs), "remained firmly in white hands until the apartheid era," explaining why Christianity retained its connotation with white authority. [170]

As a result of religions' racial associations in South Africa, problems emerged from Muslim proselytism and conversion among those outside of the religion's ethnic majority. The identification of Islam with Indians had several important implications. To those outside of the Indian community, Islam was often confused with Hinduism, and thought to be "a religion of idol worship," which Christians generally viewed with disdain.[171] The perception of Islam as the religion of Indian merchants and professionals also proved an impediment to attracting African converts, as "some African employees believed they were not treated fairly and with dignity by Indian business men and industrialists."[172] Even after democratization, Islam's association with Indian people and culture persisted, demonstrating how the politics of South Africa's racial and ethnic configuration continued to have an impact upon perceptions of conversion to

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[169] Elphick and Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, 55, 7.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Vawda, "The Emerging of Islam in an African Township," 538.
[172] Ibid.

Islam. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, conversion was viewed as a transgression of social and institutional racial divisions, as well as one's cultural and ethnic identity. Such perceptions served to limit Islamic proselytization among non-Indian ethnic communities in Durban.

However, the past thirty years have seen an increase of *da'wah* efforts on the part of Durban Muslims, aimed particularly at proselytizing Islam within black African communities. The forerunner of Islamic proselytization in Durban was Ahmed Deedat, who founded the Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC) in 1957.[173] What started as a local religious organization in Durban grew to be an international Islamic missionary movement. Although it is difficult to substantiate the organization's claim of bringing several thousand people into the fold of Islam over the course of its operation, Ahmed Deedat's work was undoubtedly important in bringing attention to the spread of Islam in South Africa, pioneering a form of evangelical *da'wah*, and democratizing Islamic missionary work.

Ahmed Deedat moved with his family to South Africa from India as a child in 1927.[174] Having left school early to work in business, Deedat never received formal training as an Islamic scholar. Nevertheless, Deedat became a prominent member of the Arabic Study Circle in Durban during the 1950s, and gave lectures on Islam through the organization.[175] Deedat described South Africa as an "ocean of Christianity," in which Muslims were "more closely connected to Islamic traditions in South Asia than to those elsewhere on the continent."[176] Concerned that rising local evangelical Christian movements posed a serious

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[173] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 966.
[174] Brian Larkin, "Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism," *Social Text* 26, no. 3 96 (2008): 101.
[175] Haron, "Da'wah Movements and Sufi Tariqahs: Competing for Spiritual Spaces in Contemporary South (Ern) Africa," 266.
[176] Larkin, "Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism," 103.

threat to Islam, given its minority status in South Africa, Deedat formed the IPC in order to spread the message of Islam in Durban and South Africa.

Deedat's methods of Islamic propagation were highly controversial. Specializing in what he defined as "comparative religion," Deedat was known for using the Bible in order to attack the legitimacy of Christianity.[177] Deedat propagated a rationalist interpretation of Islam, and his speeches and writings were aimed primarily at "demonstrating the logical impossibilities of the New Testament," and using public debates with Christian preachers to demonstrate Islam's superiority.[178] However, Deedat both challenged and emulated the Christian evangelical movements which grew in the mid-twentieth century. His speeches and debates imitated the methods of American evangelist Billy Graham, and he staged public "showdowns" where he would debate famous televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart.[179] Beyond his rhetorical style, Deedat also "mimicked the infrastructure of missionary evangelism," and circulated pamphlets, audiocassettes, and videos of his public lecture tours, in addition to appearing on television both at home and in many Muslim countries.[180] However, by presenting lectures in public spaces, such as town halls, Deedat also made use of secular modes in the public sphere in his proselytizing work.[181]

Although he was criticized for his tactic of disparaging other religions in order to draw people to Islam, Deedat garnered significant popularity both within South Africa and abroad as an orator and proponent of Islam. From 1957 to 1980, Deedat's activity and teachings were confined to South Africa, where he developed a strong support group amongst the Muslim community, who were

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[177] Ibid., 101.
[178] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 966.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Larkin, "Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism," 101.
[181] Ibid.

attracted to his "harsh method" of debate.[182] Literally and symbolically, when

Deedat "stood on the platform and debated with Christians… he was taking on the

'white man.'"[183] Deedat's success in debate thus excited many Muslims, who "felt

disempowered through colonialism and the seeming religio-cultural hegemony of

the West."[184] At the same time, there were a number of young and university-

educated Muslims in Durban and around the country who criticized Deedat's

divisive methods, and cited his approach to *da'wah* as a departure from the

Prophetic method.[185]

Deedat aligned his work with the Arabic Study Circle's impetus for a

universal and democratic Islam. Deedat's work emphasized *da'wah* as "sharing

the blessings of Islam and the resources of Muslims with as many other human

beings as possible," and Deedat's missionary efforts sought to share the Islamic

faith with as many converts as possible.[186] Locally, Deedat reached out to a broad

range of population groups as potential "reverts," and spread his Islamic teachings

beyond the Indian community.[187] Of particular interest for Deedat was

competition with Christian missionaries in African communities. In order to make

Islam more accessible to black South African in Durban, the IPC printed and

distributed a Zulu translation of the Qur'an in the 1980s, and disseminated

pamphlets, booklets, audio tapes, and videos centering upon Deedat's writings and

speeches within Durban's townships.[188] As his support and recognition grew,

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[182] Haron, "Da'wah Movements and Sufi Tariqahs: Competing for Spiritual Spaces in Contemporary South (Ern) Africa," 266.
[183] Kaarsholm, "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 126.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Haron, "Da'wah Movements and Sufi Tariqahs: Competing for Spiritual Spaces in Contemporary South (Ern) Africa," 267.
[186] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 966.
[187] "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 110.
[188] "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 967.

Deedat desired to expand the reach of his missionary activity, and in 1986, the IPC was renamed the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI) and began to receive funding from numerous Arab Muslim philanthropists. During the 1980s, Deedat embarked on tours of the United States, South-East Asia, the Middle East, and other African countries, as part of his global effort to counteract the international influence of "Born-again" Christian missionaries.[189]

Although other *da'wah* organizations were active in South Africa during this time, namely the Islamic Da'wah Movement of South Africa, also centered in Durban and whose members had branched from the MYM, and the Africa Muslim Agency, founded in 1981 and centered in Johannesburg, none matched the influence of the IPCI in reaching such broad demographics in its missionary programs. Furthermore, the IPCI has remained an influential institution in Durban, particularly in its pioneering Islamic missionary work within African communities. One important figure in the IPCI's campaign was the African lawyer Dawood Ngwane, who was born a Roman Catholic and converted to Islam in 1992 at the age of sixty.[190] Ngwane went on to engage in missionary work in Durban's African townships, where he was successful in drawing people to Islam. Adam Mncanywa was another prominent African who had been active in the IPCI, until he left in 1991 to form his own *da'wah* organization which focused on propagating Islam in African communities. He is still active as an *imam* in the Amaoti township of Indanda, a predominantly Zulu area just inland from Durban.[191] Mncanywa claims that he became "the first Zulu in Amaoti to embrace Islam" in 1977, and has since converted 40 Zulu-speaking people in his

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[189] "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 110.

[190] Ibid., 114.

[191] Ibid.

congregation to Islam.[192] Prior to his proselytizing work, Mncanywa explains that

"Islam belonged exclusively to the Indians in Phoenix [a predominantly Indian

township in Inanda] and to the Malawians – neither of whom wanted to share it

with Zulu speakers."[193] The "foreignness" of Islam presented a great weakness to

missionizing efforts, and the Indian dominated religion was seen as non-

conducive to the "amalgamation of Islamic and local African cultural traditions,"

unlike Christian Zionism, which constituted the majority religion in Indanda and

which incorporated African traditional beliefs.[194] However, the breakdown of

racial and ethnic barriers in post-apartheid South Africa, along with the work of

African Muslim missionaries, have contributed to an increasing number of black

African converts, as will be examined later in this chapter.

Islamic Guidance

Despite the IPCI's relative success in Islamic missionary activity, the

women interviewed for this thesis who knew of the organization did not believe

its programs to be effective or compassionate in addressing the needs of women

converts. They described the IPCI as impersonal, disparaging of other faiths, and

that it discouraged converts from maintaining ties with their non-Muslim families.

In particular, the women involved with the Islamic Guidance organization viewed

the programs and services it offered as filling a void left by other *da'wah*

organizations in Durban. As Aleemah explained:

> What frustrates me is that all the Islamic organizations in Durban, in fact, I
> can't say all, I would say most, 98% of them, that do *da'wah* work and help
> people who have come into the faith, are all born Muslims. And they have
> *absolutely* no idea what it means for a person who has come into the faith,
> what they're going through… [They only explain] that you have to have a

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[192] Mumisa, "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi," 118.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Kaarsholm, "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 117.

> *musalah* and pray, and you need to know how to read Quran. And they don't think of all of the other things that need to come with [conversion]. Because converting, it's not something that you just do, it is a journey, it is a transformation process.

Religious conversion is an extremely personal experience, which converts feel ought to be addressed accordingly by *da'wah* organizations. Islamic Guidance was founded and directed by a woman affectionately known in Durban's Muslim community as Auntie Gaye, a woman of Malay ancestry whose Irish grandmother had converted to Islam, and who understood the challenges faced by women in their conversion. Auntie Gaye began teaching classes in Durban in 1976 for women who wished to convert to Islam. These early classes were held in her flat, where women would learn about the religion and how to read the Qur'an, and be instructed on the everyday practice of Islam. The number of women seeking Auntie Gaye's services soon outgrew the limited space of her flat, and continued to grow from there. Today Islamic Guidance is an established and well-known Islamic organization in Durban, operating out of its center in Overport and still under the leadership of Auntie Gaye.

What sets Islamic Guidance apart from other *da'wah* organizations in Durban is that it caters specifically to women, concentrates on building personal relationships with converts, offers educational programs for women and girls, and promotes positive relations between Muslims and followers of other religions. As one woman stated, "The big difference [between the IPCI and Islamic Guidance] is that [at Islamic Guidance] we don't focus on numbers, we don't go out trying to get converts like missionaries."[195] Aleemah, who has been a part of Islamic Guidance for almost twenty years, describes the organization's approach to conversion as "loving," explaining that conversion ceremonies take place

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[195] Henna, Interview with author, June 8, 2013.

"amongst all women," and "involve a lot of explanation beforehand." A representative for Islamic Guidance estimated that over 6,000 women have passed through the organization since Auntie Gaye began teaching lessons in 1976.[196] Because Islamic Guidance does not have an expressed missionary objective, these numbers indicate that the organization had indeed provided a needed service to women converts in Durban. The organization offers women classes on Islam, provides support for converts, runs charity programs in low-income areas, hosts social events and lectures, and donates educational bursaries for Muslim girls. Henna explained that "the focus of Auntie Gaye has always been… about the quality [more] than the quantity. And so anyone who wants to be Muslim she will help them… I think [Islamic Guidance] is pretty unique in what it does."

Auntie Gaye made a point of accepting women from all backgrounds into Islamic Guidance, and integrating her classes at a time when most spaces in South Africa were racially segregated. Zarah, one of Auntie Gaye's early students, explains that the women of Islamic Guidance "broke that [racial] barrier down at the beginning. The school [had] blacks and whites, Indians and Coloureds… You have to accept every person in Islam. I came to my senses with that studying Islam." Furthermore, the Muslim community in Durban had been "broken up" along racial and cultural lines, and "when men from Indian Muslim backgrounds were marrying girls from Coloured backgrounds, from Christian backgrounds, marrying Hindu girls [during this time], it wasn't accepted in their community." Auntie Gaye, however, "was pioneering in bringing these women [into] the religion and the [Muslim] community," and ensuring that they received proper

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[196] Ibid., Estimate was based on the recent compilation of an invitation list for an alumni dinner event. Many of Islamic Guidance's early records had been destroyed in a flood in the 1990s, making the accuracy of such estimations more difficult to substantiate.

treatment from their Muslim husbands.[197] For these reasons, "women came [to

Islamic Guidance] from all different backgrounds to learn Islam. Because it was a

place where you could learn without being ostracized."[198]

Islamic Guidance was also pioneering in its commitment to female

leadership. The organization's director, teachers, administrative staff, and the

majority of the trustee board have always been women – as Henna asserts, "It's

pretty much a women run organization." Although predecessors of women's

Islamic organizations, such as the Women's Cultural Group, certainly existed,

Islamic Guidance was unique in the services and programs it offered for converted

women. Islamic Guidance promoted women's study of Islamic texts, namely the

Qur'an, as a means for women to understand and interpret the faith for

themselves. This allowed women an amount of authority over their personal faith,

without having to rely solely on male religious authorities or their Muslim-born

husbands for direction over their religious conversion and practice. Although the

Muslim community has "changed drastically over the years," and participants

believe that "there's been a larger change in [Indian Muslims] accepting women

from different backgrounds [into the community]," the purpose and work of

Islamic Guidance continues to carry its relevancy:

> Why Islamic Guidance has been so successful is because it gives women,
> new converts, it gives them an identity. Many reverts [who] are not
> accepted by their husband's families, here they find a family. There are
> bonds between all of us. You will not find that, even at IPCI… Auntie
> Gaye has a personal bond and relationship with every woman who comes
> in here. You're not going to get that anywhere else, and that's a big
> thing.[199]

For the women who have been members of Islamic Guidance, the organization's

spirit of community, support, and learning has been an important and positive

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[197] Henna, interview with author.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid.

influence in their conversion experience and religious faith. The organization's history serves to elucidate ways in which religious organizations have contributed to transformations of gender authority and attitudes towards cultural and racial integration in Durban's Muslim community, and also reflects broader social transformations occurring in South Africa over the past forty years.

Islam in African Townships

Following South Africa's transition to democracy, *da'wah* and other Islamic organizations have focused increasingly on providing services and expanding missionary programs in African townships, and post-1994 black South Africans have accepted Islam in larger numbers than previously.[200] The removal of statutory discrimination legislation in South Africa "has resulted in increased interaction between various communities and sectors of South African society… [and] contributed to a climate of greater [social] harmony," which has created opportunities for Islam to spread amongst new social groupings.[201] Additionally, this increase in conversion rates can also been attributed to the influx of Muslim immigrants from African countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt, Malawi, and Algeria who settled in predominantly African communities and spread African Islamic traditions amongst their black South African neighbors. However, the proselytizing work of Muslims in African townships has also become a source of tension between economically and socially disadvantaged Africans and wealthier Indian Muslims. This tension is reverberated by contemporary discourse relating to Africans' conversions to Islam, which has echoed early conversion narratives in explaining the acceptance of Islam as solely a means to enhanced social and economic welfare.

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[200] Mumisa, "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi," 279.
[201] Ibid., 294.

Since the dismantling of apartheid, the IPCI has played an important role in "representing a transnational Islam," and providing services and support to Durban's growing immigrant population. Immigrants often face harsh conditions, lack of government services, and xenophobia after arriving in South Africa, and the IPCI, along with other local Islamic and Christian organizations and NGOs, has initiated programs in response to these challenges.[202] A considerable portion of immigrants in Durban, who come from other African countries, are from Muslim backgrounds, and as a result "the composite nature of the Islamic landscape has been shifting," and West African influences have impacted local expressions of Islam.[203] Additionally, many of these immigrants have inter-married with South African women, and their children are invariably Muslim. In Louis Trichardt, a town north of Durban, almost 60% of the population in 2001 was Muslim, which has been attributed to marriages between Malawian immigrants and local Africans.[204] Islamic Guidance has also experienced a steady increase in the number of African women coming to Islam through such partnerships, and over the last two decades has begun printing course materials in Zulu, in addition to offering classes for "mature, uneducated black females who [began] coming to learn about the *deen* [Islamic way of life]," ostensibly because of Islam's increasing presence in African townships around Durban.[205]

Besides offering Islamic education programs for African women and girls, Islamic Guidance has run charity services for impoverished rural areas around Durban for the past thirty years.[206] These services were meant to assist African women, who, largely as a result of the migratory labor system, were often left

[202] Kaarsholm, "New Writings on Islam and Muslim Politics in South Africa," 967.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Mumisa, "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi," 288.
[205] Henna, Interview with author.
[206] Haifa. Interview with author.

with the responsibilities of managing their households and childcare without assistance from men, in addition to facing racial and gender discrimination. As Haifa explains, "[these women] don't sit back, they have to do it all without the men… the black woman is 90% stronger than the man." Islamic Guidance raised funds in order to make donations of food and clothes, in addition to offering job training programs, teaching hygiene practices, and began running weekly buses so women and girls could come to the center for classes. Although the main impetus behind these services was to alleviate women's suffering under poverty, and not to attract converts, the organization did identify its charity work with Islam, and made accommodations for women to learn about the Islamic faith.

Other Islamic organizations also engaged in charity work within African townships, and the material benefits offered to converts have been credited by scholars such as Preben Kaarsholm and Michael Mumisa as representing the main impetus behind the increasing number of African converts to the religion over the last two decades. Because the vast majority of Islamic *da'wah* organizations operating in Durban were run by Indian Muslims, Islam has continued to be seen by Africans as a religion "imposed from the outside," which "reduced African Muslims to beggars dependent on handouts from [Indian organizations]."[207] The conversions brought about by the dissemination of Islamic charity services such as education, food parcels, and money for school uniforms in townships also advanced the perception of African converts as "opportunistic and short term… Muslims by day and Zionists by night."[208] In employing a materialist strategy of proselytization, Muslim organizations hope that a "spiritual and moral

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[207] Kaarsholm, "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 117.
[208] Ibid.

breakthrough" will follow conversion brought about by material gains.[209] In Michael Mumisa's 2002 study of Islamic proselytization in Indanda, African converts are in turn seen to have resented dependency on Islamic charity, and being treated as "peasants… the have-nots" by Indian Muslims.[210] It is a timeless motif of missionary activity, one that also played out in Christian missionary work in South Africa – appeal first to those on the margins of society by offering protection, education, and charity in order to promote religious conversion. However, as previously discussed, this narrative does not provide a complete account of the conversion experience, and presents a distorted interpretation of conversion which discounts individual agency and spirituality.

Studies have also presented another impetus for conversion to Islam amongst black South Africans, whereby Islam is perceived as "a cure against immorality and dissolution."[211] Given South Africa's notoriously high rates of violent crime and the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic within the country over the past twenty years, Islam's prohibitions on alcohol and drugs is seen to "help people stay out of crime and promiscuity, and away from HIV/AIDS."[212] Furthermore, Islam holds particular appeal to women, who view the religion as affording women rights and protections that are not found in Western, Christian, or traditional African society. Jamilah, who is of African descent, and who was introduced to Islam by an Egyptian neighbor in her township, explains that "to be a Muslim is to be disciplined," and Islam is "clean, it is better," as "Muslim girls are not allowed to have boyfriends, they must get married … I haven't heard of a Muslim woman being raped." Although Muslim

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[209] Ibid., 115.
[210] Mumisa, "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi," 239.
[211] Kaarsholm, "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 116.
[212] Ibid.

women are obviously not impervious to sexual assault, Jamilah's claims reveal how adherence to Islam can be considered as a viable solution to many of the issues faced by township communities in South Africa.

As will be explored further in the following chapter, African women's embrace of Islam is highly complex and personal, and involves more than an opportunity for increased social welfare. Since the end of the apartheid era, African townships have been considered "the single most important area for the growth of Islam [in South Africa]."[213] Scholars of Islam in South Africa have argued that given the realities of race and class, "as well as the construction of identities along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines," the relationship between African and Indian Muslims in South Africa "cannot easily be collapsed into an Islamic principle of an indivisible community of believers," and that *da'wah* organizations will continue to meet with limited success.[214] However, there exists enough evidence to the contrary, such as Islamic Guidance's continued commitment to the implementation of Islam's non-racial teachings, the work of ILM-SA in drawing together women from all parts of South Africa's Muslim community, and the personal experiences of my study's participants, to suggest that an Islamic universalism is possible in South Africa. Furthermore, Islam's linkages to South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East are all manifest in the religion's expression in Durban, giving Islam in the region a transnational character.[215] Although still a minority religion in South Africa, the growing presence of Islam within Durban and KwaZulu-Natal's public sphere indicates

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[213] Vawda, "The Emerging of Islam in an African Township," 248.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Kaarsholm, "Transnational Islam and Public Sphere Dynamics in Kwazulu-Natal: Rethinking South Africa's Place in the Indian Ocean World," 128.

that Islam will continue to expand amongst different population groups, reflecting the nation's transformation to non-racial democracy.

Studies on Conversion to Islam

Conversion to Islam is attracting increasing attention worldwide, and Islam is purported to be the fastest growing religion in the contemporary world.[216] The past twenty years have seen significant development in the study of conversion to Islam in the West. Although it is highly problematic to label South Africa as a Western society, the social and demographic context of South Africa allows for parallels to be drawn with other Muslim minority societies. Further, although Islam has a long history in South Africa, it is not indigenous to the region, and has always existed as a minority religion in a predominantly Christian society, much as it has in most of Europe and the United States. It is noteworthy that within South Africa itself, citizens can identity as belonging to either Western or African society. This incongruence became apparent in my field research, as two of this study's white participants described South Africa as a Western society, while the two black African participants emphasized their conversions in the context of African culture and society, despite the fact that all four resided within fifteen miles of one another.

Ali Kose's 1996 work on individuals' conversions to Islam in Britain represents an important addition to studies on religious conversion, as individual conversion to Islam had previously been given little attention in religious studies. Kose's study focuses on the conversion experiences of seventy native British converts to Islam, and is important in capturing information about conversion to Islam in the context of a Muslim minority society. The conversion experiences

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[216] Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," 153.

captured by this study thus provide suitable comparison for those of my South African participants.

In addition to collecting background and demographic information on British converts via an extensive questionnaire, the author presents a quantitative analysis which compares the conversion experiences of the study's participants to existing physiological and sociological conversion theories. In this analysis, Kose made use of Lofland and Skonovd's descriptive system for the study of religious conversion, which identifies six "conversion motifs."[217] These motifs are described as intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. Based on the responses of the seventy participants, the intellectual, affectional, and experimental motifs occurred most frequently – amongst 71 percent, 66 percent, and 60 percent of participants, respectively.[218] These findings suggest that the most of those who converted were searching for a meaning or a path in life by some combination of reading and discussion, experimentation with Muslim religious requirements, and friendship or marriage with a Muslim, as is also true of the conversion narratives collected for this thesis.

In his findings, Kose presents two broad groups of converts to Islam. The first group comprises individuals who were most likely "men, non-Sufi, not married to a Muslim at the time of conversion, and reporting intellectual and experimental motifs and a generally world-affirming conversion history."[219] Those belonging to the second group were more likely to be "women, Sufi… married to a Muslim at the time of conversion… reporting affectional and

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[217] John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981).

[218] Ali Köse and Kate Miriam Loewenthal, "Conversion Motifs among British Converts to Islam," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2000): 102.

[219] Ibid., 109.

mystical motifs and a more world-rejecting conversion history."[220] In this study,

"world-affirming" conversion experiences are defined as "open to seekers and

employ… low social pressure," and converts are "likely to report intellectual,

experimental, and mystical motifs, reflecting the converts' active search for new

possibilities and… the free pursuit of spiritual goals."[221] Conversely, world-

rejecting religious groups would "exploit emotional vulnerabilities in a process of

stricter encapsulation, and the likely conversion motifs would be affectional,

revivalist, and coercive."[222]

However, of the eight women interviewed for this thesis, I would not

qualify any's life history as belonging exclusively to either of Kose's general

groupings. Each woman's narrative contained, to varying extents, elements of

each of the six categories of conversion motif as proposed by Lofland and

Skonovd. With regard for the complexity of conversion stories, these generic

conversion motifs are able to provide a shorthand representation of individuals'

experiences converting to Islam, and allow for quantitative analysis to be carried

out regarding normative features of conversion. However, these motifs do not

necessarily provide an adequate framework for qualitative historical analysis.

Conversion does not take place in a social vacuum, and the social context of one's

conversion greatly impacts construction of the conversion narrative, which is

difficult to evaluate on a quantitative scale.

Other studies on women's conversion to Islam in the West have focused

on constructing and analyzing personal narratives of female converts, providing a

model for this study. These include the respective works of Anna McGinty,

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[220] Ibid., 110.
[221] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 104.
[222] Ibid., 105.

Carolyn Rouse, and Margot Badran, who each conducted field research consisting

of life history interviews with women who converted to Islam as the basis for their

writing. McGinty's work on female converts in Sweden and the United States

offers an anthropological study of the social, cultural, and cognitive phenomenon

related to conversion to Islam. Nine women were interviewed for the study,

whose conversions took place between 1971 and 1998. In presenting the

conversion narratives of these women, McGinty explores how issues of religious,

social, gender, and cultural identity mark the conversion process, and how

perceptions and expressions of Islam in Western society have impacted women's

experience in embracing Islam. Through this work it is seen that many of the

participants faced discrimination as Muslim women, particularly in reaction to

negative preconceptions regarding women's status in Islam and its confliction

with Western feminist ideologies. [223]

Unlike in the West, in South Africa there appears to be an absence of

highly negative public feelings towards Islam, and the religion has not been as

strongly maligned by the media as in the West. The anti-apartheid struggle and

the current project of constructing the new South Africa seem to be among the

explanatory factors. Strongly held ideas about equality and justice - which were

for so long hijacked in South Africa - in what is today a highly pluralistic society

create a different public space and a different public ethic. Moreover, South

Africa is a more religious society than most societies in the West, with 85 percent

of the population identifying with a religion in the 2001 population census (as

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[223] Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim : Western Women's Conversions to Islam*, 1st ed., Culture, Mind, and Society (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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compared to approximately 70 percent in the United Kingdom).[224] The women

interviewed for this study all had, at least to some extent, religious upbringings.

Furthermore, although many had misconceptions about Islam prior to their

conversions, none reported personally having a negative perception of Islam or

Muslims before converting. However, one white participant describes that there

were changes in public perception of Muslims in South Africa following the

World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks of September 11, 2001:

> At my son's [predominantly white] school, the day after [9/11], suddenly, people who were his friends, for some it was like [accusatory tone], "*You* Muslims who did this," and suddenly he had to deal with all of this negativity: it was because of *you*, it was *you* who did this to the buildings. And he could not understand that. [Muslims] here didn't know where this came from, that suddenly they were a guilty party to what had happened in a country they had never even been to. So, yes, things certainly changed, definitely. And in the bigger community, you know, there was this sort of heightened thing, and [in the news] there was some guy in New Castle [a city in Kwa-Zulu Natal north of Durban], he was from Pakistan and he was kind of lynched out of his house at night and taken away and nobody ever knew what happened to him. Things did start to happen, yes, things definitely changed. But eventually it kind of went into, it kind of died down, as the hype all dies, that died down. But there is, there is a definite change in how things are seen.[225]

Another white participant, who converted in 2005, recalls that her father referred

derogatively to her Indian Muslim husband to-be as a "terrorist." [226] These

experiences suggest that negative representations of Islam were not all together

absent in South Africa, and that Muslims were subjected to discrimination,

particularly on the part of white South Africans, although none of the other

women interviewed reported encountering discrimination as a Muslim.

However, this does not mean that participants did not contend with more

widespread social attitudes in their conversions. In particular, gender is a crucial

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[224] Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," 203.
[225] Aleemah, Interview with author.
[226] Mariya, Interview with author, April 27, 2013.

issue in conversion to Islam, particularly for women in contemporary Muslim minority societies. Converts' interpretations of gender roles and feminism in Islam and their identity as Muslim women loom largely over the narratives presented by McGinty, Rouse, and Badran, as converts worked to reconcile their gender identity and support of feminism, formed in the context of Western society, with their religious conversion. Islam offers a clear model of manhood and womanhood, and distinct moral boundaries and rules regarding the two sexes.

For women, conversion to Islam is often more conspicuous than for men, as they adopt new, more conservative, styles of dress. Some converts find these guidelines and structure to be an attractive feature of Islam, while others have difficulty reconciling their socialized gender identity with their conversion to Islam.[227] Margot Badran's work focuses on how British, Dutch, and South African women who converted to Islam have engaged with feminism throughout their lives, and how they access and produce Islamic feminism. Badran argues that unlike their British and Swedish counterparts, the three South African women interviewed for her study "came into contact with a feminist Islam early on, and… found a homegrown Islamic feminist activist culture [in South Africa]."[228]

These women's conversions, two of which occurred in 1994 and the third in 2000, are described as a "dual embrace" of Islam and Islamic feminism.[229] The women identified themselves as feminists prior to their conversion, and had been active in political groups promoting the reconstruction of South African society. Connections with the Muslim Youth Movement and the organization's Gender Desk are credited with having acquainted the women with a concept of Islamic

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[227] Karin van Nieuwkerk, introduction to *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University Texas Press, 2006), 8.
[228] Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," 219.
[229] Ibid., 220.

feminism. After personal consideration, they were able to adapt Islamic teachings

on gender within the framework their personal ideologies regarding feminism,

allowing them to fully embrace the faith.[230] Although an Islamic feminist

movement, enacted by women and men together, to eradicate patriarchal injustices

was well under way by the time of their conversions, these individuals'

experiences with conversion and Islamic feminism should not be taken as

representative of all women converts in South Africa. Of my participants, only

one identified explicitly as a feminist, and none of the women indicated that their

conversions to Islam coincided with study of Islamic feminism.

This is not to say that the converts did not engage with feminism. In her

writing on women of the African American Sunni Muslim community in Southern

California, Carolyn Rouse explains how African American converts to Islam

fulfilled feminist ideals while also performing gender roles as defined in the

Qur'an:

> If women who believe in and seek out their own empowerment should be
> considered feminists then African American converts are feminists. They
> fulfill feminist ideals of producing local knowledge and articulating an
> erudite Islamic scholarship that imagines numerous possibilities…. In
> consciousness and action [converts] have many of the same characteristics,
> and fulfill many of the same roles, as feminists. Muslim women [in this
> study] recognize Islam to be the first "feminist" monotheistic religion, and
> therefore when they choose to identity as Muslims, as opposed to
> feminists, it is more for political reasons rather than any clear objections to
> women's equality as defined by the West. [231]

Unlike subscribers of Western feminist ideology, which Rouse defines as the

"assertion that women are as intellectually and morally capable as men of

participating in the social, economic, and political life of a society," participants in

Rouse's study acknowledge that there are alternative ways to view the importance

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[230] Ibid.

[231] Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender : African American Women and Islam*, George
Gund Foundation Imprint in African American Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press,
2004), 150.

of women, and that maybe the model of men and women performing the same roles is not the best way to organize a family or society.[232] As was the case with the women presented in my study, African American Muslim women worked, ended troubled marriages, and strove for greater gender equality within their families and community. Although Islamic doctrine outlines specific gender roles and expectations for women and men, Muslim women should not be perceived as disempowered by their religious beliefs, as will be demonstrated in my examination of women's conversion narratives.

Rouse explains that the converts she interviewed for her study "had a critical perspective on the social history of their communities, and each believed Islam could successfully house their personal, political, and spiritual selves."[233] This observation deftly encapsulates how women are able to assert their intellectual and spiritual agency in coming to Islam, and also serves to counter Kose's assertion that conversion represents "a definitive break with one's former identity … [involving] a radical change in one's identity, beliefs, ideas, values, and personality."[234] The respective works of McGinty, Badran, and Rouse, along with my own research into the life histories of female converts to Islam, suggest that conversion does not necessarily entail a decisive break from one's identity, ideology, and sense of self prior to the conversion. In fact, it was women's exploration and reconciliation of their identity as a Muslim and their identity prior to converting which allows for conversion narratives to reveal the social implications and significance of women's conversion experiences.

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[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid., 35.
[234] Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam : A Study of Native British Converts*(New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996).

Chapter Three: South African Women's Conversions to Islam

The life stories of my participants provide vibrant accounts of the lives of eight women who converted to Islam in Durban. Though the personal history of each woman is unique, there surfaced common themes within their individual life experiences. What follows is an examination of these themes in relation to my informant's lives and the historical events in South Africa which they experienced. The women's narratives are presented thematically in order to emphasize the differences and similarities of the converts' experiences. As much as possible, I attempt to grant agency to these women by relating their own experiences through their own voices. Their becoming Muslim was experienced and told in a specific sociocultural context. Moreover, religion is supposed to be "integrative, both for the individual and society... it supplies overarching beliefs and values which act as the touchstone for individual and social activity."[235] In narrating their experiences of conversion to Islam, participants narrated introspective journeys that have engaged them with the social, religious, gender, and ethnic dynamics of their families, communities, and nation. These stories elucidate historical changes amongst Durban's Muslim population through instances of cultural plurality, discrimination, gender roles and authority, and the effect of such social constructs upon Muslim identity.

Coming to Islam

In converting to a new religion, women exercise agency, bravely and decisively, in going against the grain of their background, family, and culture, by opting for something strange and new. None of the women in this study had been

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[235] HSRC Investigation into Intergroup Relations. Work Committee: Religion. and G. C. Oosthuizen, *Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa*(Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1985), 101.

the target of Muslim missionary activity, but each was exposed to a Muslim way

of life before making the decision to embrace Islam. In his study on British

converts to Islam, Kose notes that the majority of research on conversion extant at

the time of his work agreed that although conversion is possible at any age, it is

most likely to take place during adolescence, around age 15.[236] However, the

average age of conversion for his participants was 29.7, with the vast majority

falling between the ages of 23-45 at the time of conversion.[237] As with Kose's

findings, the majority of my study's participants converted to Islam while in their

20s, and none before the age of 19. They encountered and learned about Islam

through their romantic partners, friends or colleagues at work. In addition, before

their conversion, these converts were motivated to investigate Islam, through

study of Islamic texts, reading about Islam, and attending classes at local Muslim

organizations. Participants of this study took a critical approach to their

interpretation of Islam in their journey to conversion. Aleemah, who converted to

Islam when she married a Muslim man in 1988, is now a university lecturer in

Islamic Studies. In her opinion:

> The difference being between a born Muslim, and someone [who comes]
> into the faith… is that when you're born into the faith, you're constantly
> reminded, this is the way it is. Even as a Christian, you are brought up and
> socialized in a very specific way, and you're constantly told, you know,
> this is what the doctrine is… And so I find that a lot of Muslims will not
> question, they will just accept whatever is taught to them, because of this
> fear of retribution that is going to come later because they are questioning
> what is being said…Whereas those who come in, are coming one, from a
> different background, and two, they're not going to know if they don't
> question. And so they do question in order to get the answers… they don't
> have that same kind of innate fear of questioning. Very often, you will
> find that Muslim people who have converted may extend their knowledge
> far more than a born Muslim, because they are prepared to question.

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[236] Köse, *Conversion to Islam : A Study of Native British Converts*, 46.
[237] Ibid., 47.

Islam endorses *ijtihad*, individual investigation of sacred texts. A Dutch participant in Badran's study on conversion asserted that for women in Islam, "knowledge is authority," an observation which also resonates with South African converts of varying age, racial, ethnic, social, and educational backgrounds.[238]

Each woman interviewed emphasized the importance of learning about and studying Islam as both a religion and way of life to their conversion experience, which in many instances was a way by which they distinguished themselves from women who become Muslim "in name only" for the purposes of marriage to a Muslim man, and never pursue knowledge of Islam and its practice. This distinction was expressed by participants of all different ages and backgrounds, and represents a way in which converts validate their agency in embracing Islam both intellectually and spiritually.

Although Kalila and Mariya both became interested in learning about Islam after becoming involved with their Muslim husbands to-be, the two emphasized that their conversions were premeditated. Though their partners were supportive of their interest in Islam, neither reported feeling pressured into converting, and both women said they chose to convert, of their own volition, prior to their marriage. Kalila explains that she "was interested in Islam before I got married," and took classes to study the Qur'an. Finding similarities between Islam and her Catholic upbringing made her feel comfortable with accepting Islam, and she converted in 1963. Kalila therefore did not feel as if she had to give up strongly held values from her childhood by converting. Conversion is defined and understood not only through the changes that follow from becoming

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[238] Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," 205.

Muslim, but also through continuity, reconfirmation of preexisting values, and an all-embracing feeling of connecting earlier understandings with new ones.[239]

Mariya relates that, "funny enough, up until living in Durban [and meeting my husband]… to me Indians were Indians. I didn't know that you had Hindu, [or] Tamil, [or] Muslim. I didn't know what Muslim was, I didn't know what Islam was. No idea, no clue." Mariya, not having been religious herself, had been intrigued by her to-be husband's piety, "decided to learn about Islam, and find out what makes [the religion] so special that [her] husband wouldn't want to leave his religion for anything." She describes that "dating from there became discussions about the religion." Her decision to convert in 2005 was professedly independent from her marriage - "it's not like I was forced into it, I wanted to learn, I wanted to [convert]." Mariya learned about Islam by reading, "I had a stack of books, I love to read, so I read up about [Islam]," and "just asking everyday questions [to my husband, his family, and other Muslims I met], even up until today… I still have discussions about Islam."

In contrast to her own interest in learning about Islam, Mariya points out that:

> A lot of women who have become Muslim convert just to get married. And they don't practice the religion from there. I see it in my husband's own family, a few women have become Muslim, but they don't practice it. One became Muslim one year after I did, and yet she still doesn't know her basics, she doesn't want to learn. So not everyone [converts] because they want to be Muslim. Some do it because of marriage, just to get married, or to keep [their Muslim in-laws] quiet.

Kalila very similarly reports that "you get those that convert only to marry a Muslim. His family will say 'this girl must convert' but they are not a practicing family," which in turn makes it difficult for the convert to know how to practice

[239] Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim : Western Women's Conversions to Islam*.

Islam properly. From Mariya and Kalila's observations, it would seem that women face pressure to convert to Islam from Muslim in-laws, even if their conversion is only nominal. Furthermore, marriage can bear a strong influence over the religious beliefs and practices of the individual. Many studies on religious conversion have shown that spouses are often instrumental in inducing the individual to convert.[240] Furthermore, "because of females' traditionally subordinate role, they convert more frequently than their husbands."[241] However, the experiences of the women in this study show that even those whose conversions were motivated by marriage developed an intellectual understanding of Islam and embraced a spiritual Muslim identity.

Zarah and Aleemah, who were also introduced to Islam by their Muslim husbands, did not begin practicing as Muslims until sometime after their *nikah* wedding ceremonies. Zarah, who was Hindu, had no knowledge of Islam at the time of her *nikah* with a Muslim man in 1981. Although her husband would not allow her to practice Hinduism at home, she recounts that:

> I didn't want to learn about Islam, I wanted to complain to somebody about [my husband], who made me give up my religion, yet is not practicing [Islam himself], and I've got a child and I don't know what to do. I didn't want to learn about the religion, if he didn't know his own religion, why should I have to learn it? That was my thinking.

Zarah's experience contests Kose's finding amongst British Muslim women that those "who converted [to Islam] through marriage stated that their Muslim partners took Islam more seriously than the interviewees did their religion."[242] It is obvious that Zarah felt disempowered in her marriage, as she was forced to sacrifice her Hindu religion, an integral part of her identity, without recourse. Furthermore, she was unable to find resources through which she could seek

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[240] Köse, *Conversion to Islam : A Study of Native British Converts*, 114.
[241] Ibid., 116.
[242] Ibid., 117.

redress for the treatment she was receiving from her husband. Although Zarah sought the help of a local *mawlana*, she was told that unless she converted to Islam her *nikah* would not be considered valid and she could not claim the rights afforded to Muslim women in marriage.

Unhappy with this response, Zarah wanted guidance on how to solve the problems she was having in her marriage. She took the advice of a Muslim coworker (her only Muslim acquaintance outside of her husband and his family) and contacted Auntie Gaye:

> One evening, without [my husband] knowing, I took the bus and I went up to [Auntie Gaye's flat]. I said to her, "I have a problem with my marriage; I don't know what to do, do you think you can help me?" She said, "Why don't you come and join my classes?" I thought no, I didn't come here to become a Muslim, I came because I married a Muslim man, which was not valid [because I was not Muslim], and I needed to know what to do. She gave me a blue book and a tape, and said "Why don't you go home and listen to this?" And I was not happy. I put the tape on and it was Arabic. And I thought, this is even worse. Why should I leave my religion to learn this new language? It was too difficult to even pronounce. I put it away and said, not for me, I'll just live the way I am. And [Auntie Gaye] called me after a few weeks and asked how it was going. I said not well, because I'm in a relationship with this man and I have a baby and I don't know what to do. She said, "Okay, why don't you come and join my classes here, come and sit one Tuesday evening?" I went one evening, and there were about six girls in her lounge, and they were all sitting and reading Arabic. Then she introduced me to everyone and they were all reverts. Everyone was a revert there. There were Coloured women, there were Indian women, there was a black woman. I was taken aback. I did not believe they were really reverts, they were reading so well. And I thought I could learn too. So I went back home and I put the tape in and I started memorizing the *suras* and learning how to pray. I was learning and I loved it.

After a year of classes, Zarah was ready for her conversion ceremony:

> I learned to wash myself before I pray, and that was easy because as a Hindu we also wash ourselves before we pray. And then I said the [*shahada*], but I can't even describe what it was to say those words. I felt something coming out of me, it was the best feeling of my life. My mom was late, but I had this feeling my mom was there. It was the most beautiful feeling.

Zarah's description of her conversion, though perhaps embellished after the fact, affirms her spiritual commitment to Islam. After her conversion, Zarah continued to study Islam by reading, working with Islamic Guidance, and listening to radio programs, explaining that in Islam, "you can always learn, there's no set time for learning. You can learn until you die." She related that although she was unhappy with her marriage, she credits the challenges she faced as having brought her to Islam, which appears to have been an important source of security, community, and fulfillment in her life.

Zarah was also able to leverage her knowledge of Islam to establish greater authority in her marriage. She recounts that one night after class, she came home and asked her husband, "What is the meaning of Islam?" to which he replied, "Islam is Islam." Zarah, dissatisfied with his answer, responded by saying, "Let me tell you what Islam is about. Islam is the total submission to the one God," and in doing so, "awakened something in [her husband]." She explains that her devotion to Islam made her husband "ashamed" that he was not practicing the religion, and her conversion inspired him to recommit to his faith. The two made *nikah* again, this time valid, so that Zarah was then entitled to marriage rights as a Muslim woman. As a Muslim, she also felt she had more authority over the upbringing of her children.

Aleemah, who grew up in Durban, claims to have "never even met a Muslim" before meeting her husband to-be, explaining that under apartheid "you didn't meet [people of other ethnicities], because we were separated." Raised as a Catholic, and having studied Christianity in school as per the government's set curriculum, Aleemah says that:

> I was always the one who had a different opinion to everybody else [in my religion class]… I never saw God and Jesus as one and the same, to me

they were always separate. It was something I just believed, it was not something I was taught. At that stage I didn't even know about Islam.

Aleemah's official conversion took place at the time of her *nikah*, and although she "had no issues converting, because the core teachings [of Islam] tended to match [her] own processes," she describes her conversion ceremony, as "very, cold, very unloving, there wasn't warmth at all in that process." Admittedly, she does not believe she would have converted were it not "what was expected at the time." Although Islamic doctrine allows marriage between a Muslim man and Christian or Jewish woman, it was customary amongst Durban's Muslim community that any non-Muslim woman wishing to marry a Muslim man convert. Following her wedding, Aleemah "did the outward things [of being Muslim]," such as fasting and attending Muslim funerals, but "had absolutely no idea how to pray," and knew very little about Islam. [243]

Like Zarah, Aleemah felt that she had relegated authority to her husband in agreeing to convert - "I gave up far more than what my husband did in being Muslim. And that was very difficult. You are expected to do far more, and your husband will not do the same for you." Although Aleemah attributes pressure to convert in fostering unequitable marriage dynamics, she maintains that she had no qualms with accepting Islam in itself. However, it was only when her eldest child began attending *madrasah* that she decided to enroll herself in classes at Islamic Guidance, so that she could learn about Islam in order to answer his questions about their religion. These classes piqued Aleemah's intellectual interest in Islam, and she went on to complete a master's degree in Islamic Studies – "I was trying to get all the knowledge I could [to become an instructor]… So that's why I went

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[243] This view on the necessity of a woman's conversion for purposes of marriage to a Muslim man was expressed by Aleemah, Zarah, Layla, Haifa, and Henna in their respective interviews.

back [to school]." Additionally, her studies were an opportunity for her to engage in work and activity outside of the home -"I [then] had something to do as well, besides children." Aleemah thus challenged conventional attitudes, prevalent in both South Africa and conservative interpretations of Islam, that women's activities should be confined to the private sphere and their role as mothers.

Batool, Aaliyah, and Jamilah's conversions to Islam were instigated by interactions with Muslim friends and community members. Batool, an Afrikaner woman who converted to Islam in 1989, is the only white participant to have had exposure to, and interaction with, Muslims growing up. In the area around her rural hometown there had existed a visible Muslim population -"even on the farms, we had to go into town, and… you would always see the ladies with their scarves." Aaliya also reports that in the rural area where she grew up, a Muslim family ran the local shop. Although Muslims in South Africa are most often associated with urban settings, Islam also has a presence outside of major population centers, which can be attributed the shops set up by Indian traders to serve farming communities.

Batool also remembers being attracted to the dress of the Muslim women she saw in Durban when she was young – "we would go to the beach front and see the ladies with their clothes and their beautiful colored scarves… that always sort of caught my eye." When she was about eighteen, Batool befriended a Muslim woman she met at a shop in Durban. Through this new friend she began to discover more about Islam and was introduced to a group of Muslims her age. As Batool's network of Muslim friends grew, so did her interest in the religion. She describes how her desire to embrace Islam developed:

> I think only when I really started making [Muslim] friends, and I noticed their difference on certain things, and I was curious as to why… I

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remember once we were travelling in the car, and they played a reading of the Quran and I was like, [expression of awe] "wow," I was almost crying. I mean, I didn't even know what that man was reading but I knew it was touching me in my heart, something's there. And I think that's how it slowly sort of made me feel comfortable, something that I feel is touching my heart, and that's how I think it eventually came to the point where I realized that this is the way that I would like to live.

Batool considers her conversion to Islam as a process that happened over time and involved learning about Islam through avid reading and asking questions of her Muslim friends – "I wanted to know everything, it was like, I want to know it *now*, I couldn't stand to wait. I got very passionate about [studying Islam]." She believes that continuously striving to learn more about Islam is vital to keeping a strong faith.

Though her children's father was nominally Muslim, he was not practicing and Aaliyah remained a devout Christian until she was moved to convert by her children's enthusiasm for Islam. Aaliyah explains that she and her daughters came to Islam through their enrollment in a local Islamic preschool:

I liked the way they taught [at the school]. The man teaching them was a Muslim. What I liked about them is they didn't criticize our life because we are Christian. Now [the man who ran the school] was a very kind person. At the start I felt like, if the [Muslim] people are so good like this, they don't care if you are a Christian or whatever, we still take care of your children like they are their children. They take the children and they teach them everything about Islam. At the time my children were not Muslim. They were only going to school to learn there. And when they come back, I asked them what they learn, and they would explain to me. That's how I fell in love with Islam.

Through the school, Aaliyah obtained a Xhosa translation of the Qur'an, which she studied ardently, and in 2000 she decided to have a conversion ceremony through a Muslim organization operating in her township. She explains that at first, "when I converted, I did not do anything. I did not follow Islam. But then I realized that if I was to grow, I must continue to learn about Islam." Aaliyah became involved with an educational program run through Durban's NMJ Islamic

Centre (and later the ILM-SA organization), in 2005, and began taking classes on Islam along with other African and Indian Muslim women, and was also able to learn English. She attributes her education in Islam to her adoption of a Muslim lifestyle, adhering to a halal diet, and wearing a cloak and head scarf while in public.

For Aaliyah, the opportunity for continued religious education, especially classes for women, is a strong appeal of Islam:

> It's nice to be a woman in Islam. It is nice to learn. A lot of time, the African people who convert, they don't continue reading or learning. I think Islam is nice when you continue to learn more, you gain a lot. The better you learn the more you gain and the more you are able to help your child with it. I think it's good, especially with the women, to gain more knowledge.

Aaliyah claims that women who convert "only for marriage [to a Muslim man]… do not know Islam like I know it," implying that her decision to convert was based on personal convictions and agency. The authority that comes with increased knowledge of their religion is an important factor of women from all races' conversions to Islam, but the opportunity for adult education through Muslim organizations seems to hold special significance for the African women in this study, who were unable to attain the level of education as other participants due to their severe social and economic disadvantages under apartheid.

Jamilah grew up in an area designated as a Xhosa homeland under apartheid. She was forced by her father to leave school after completing Standard 6, though she had attempted to secretly enroll in the next grade level. After moving to Durban in 1982, she joined a Born-again Christian church, but was dissatisfied with the church's lack of charity services in the community given the money it collected. In 2004, Jamilah started running a soup kitchen and day care service (which she now runs as an after school *madrasah*) from her home for

HIV/AIDS patients in her community. Her charity work attracted the attention of an Egyptian man from her township, who spoke with her about Islam's tenet of charity, and how her work exemplified the spirit of Islamic faith.

Jamilah wished to learn more about this faith, and her new Egyptian friend provided her with reading material, answered questions about Muslim lifestyle, and "he told me how nice it was to be a Muslim." Jamilah was particularly attracted to Islam's emphasis on individual acts of charity, explaining that "[in the Christian church] if you want to give money, you must take it to the pastor. Why must I take it to the pastor? Why can't I take it all straight to the poor and help them? Islam lets me do that." After learning about Islam, Jamilah recalls saying to herself, "I can be Muslim, I can follow." Jamilah converted to Islam in 2011, and has since started classes and received funds for her charity work through ILM-SA. She says that since converting, "I'm more informed. I have an education about Islam. There is always more to understand."

Through their personal study of Islam, the women interviewed demonstrate their self-agency in converting. Whether independently or guided by their partners and religious instructors, the converts' intellectual exploration of Islam represented a significant factor in their decisions to embrace Islam as a religion and way of life. Their individual interpretations of Islam allowed them to assess their new faith critically, and develop distinct Muslim identities for themselves.   The women view their commitment to studying Islam as ongoing, and a source of personal pride as well as winning respect from other Muslims. Their conversions demonstrate an intellectual and spiritual acceptance of Islam which lies outside of the conversion narratives examined in my previous chapter.

Interracial Relations and Resolving Cultural Identity

       South Africa's history of colonization and apartheid included discriminatory laws, policies, and practices based on factors including race, gender, culture, and religion. The goal was to create "a system of legal, social, and economic separation of the country's people."[244] Religious groups, though, can be seen to have transcended these barriers. The results of a 1988 survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa showed that "for most of those surveyed the religious component was stronger than the racial one in this area of potential intergroup contact... levels of multi-racial acceptance suggested that religion transcended race entirely for most of those interviewed," and respondents indicated that "the ideal social function of religion... is supposed to unite people rather than divide them."[245] However, a higher proportion of the participants were opposed to multi-racial marriage and schooling, even with co-religionists, suggesting that although many believed one should not be barred from membership to a religion on the basis of race, religious communities and institutions were still segregated.[246]

       Islam's close association with Indian culture in Durban, coupled with apartheid's compartmentalization of racial identities, meant that conversion to Islam signified a transgression of social and institutional ethnic divisions. In their experiences with conversion, the women of this study were confronted with both their own prejudices and those of their family, community, and broader society. Though apartheid was undoubtedly successful in institutionalizing racial

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[244] Rashida Manjoo, "Legal Recognition of Muslim Marriages in South Africa," in *Gender and Islam in Africa : Rights, Sexuality, and Law*, ed. Margot Badran(Washington, D.C.; Stanford, Calif.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford University Press, 2011), 291.

[245] HSRC Investigation into Intergroup Relations. Work Committee: Religion. and Oosthuizen, *Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa*, 49.

[246] Ibid.

discrimination, the experiences of this study's participants are indicative of apartheid's failings, in particular its inability to prevent interracial friendships, marriages and cultural exchanges present in the lives of participants. Using their faith as a source of strength, women were able to transgress personal and social barriers in embracing Islam.

Zarah and Layla, who were both born in 1948 and are of Indian descent, describe how intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims was stigmatized in the Indian community at the time they became involved with Muslim men, around 1970. Layla says that even after her conversion to Islam, her in-laws were unhappy with the match between her and her husband, "because I wasn't a born Muslim. In their community, it was that, you can be a Muslim and be a prostitute and they'll accept you rather than someone reverted into Islam." Despite the negative treatment she received from her husband's family, Layla remained committed to her marriage and the Islamic faith. When Zarah found out that the man she was to marry was Muslim, "I knew there was going to be a big uproar in my [Hindu] family. Nobody approved." Kalila's Coloured family was also wary of her decision to convert in 1963, explaining also that "Catholics weren't in favor of anyone converting to Islam." This claim suggests that Islam in particular was viewed with antagonism.   Although historical studies do not describe any open sectarian hostilities amongst Durban's Indian population, it is clear from Layla and Zarah's experiences that internal prejudices did exist between different religious communities. Zarah says that things have changed since her marriage in 1981, and now "there's a lot of intermarriage, and a lot of people [converting]. My younger [Muslim-born] son married a Hindu girl, and my elder [Hindu-born] son married a Muslim girl."

Aleemah and Mariya, who are both white, had to contend with the racist attitudes of their families in their marriages to Muslim men of Indian descent. Mariya states that growing up, "my father, who's Afrikaans, and coming from, he grew up in that apartheid time so, yes, he was racist. Definitely he was, and I saw that, but I didn't agree with it." After learning of her relationship with an Indian Muslim, Mariya says her father told her that she was "marrying a terrorist." Aleemah relates that to her parents, the racial dynamic of her marriage was of much greater concern to her parents than her conversion - "My parents were devastated, in terms of the race issue… [it was] not something that they expected or accepted or anything like that. In fact, my father actually cried when my husband asked him if he could marry me." In her household growing up, Aleemah explains that "non-white people were people that we never integrated with, and they were certainly always [seen] as the 'other.'"

The attitudes of Mariya and Aleemah's parents reflected negative public perceptions of interracial relationships that are the legacy of apartheid. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 prohibited marriage between persons of different races, and the Immorality Act of 1950 made sexual relations with a person of a different race a criminal offence. The repeal of these two pieces of legislation did not come until 1985, three years before Aleemah's marriage. Though there were no legal hindrances, Aleemah recalls some of the difficulties she and her husband faced having an interracial relationship during the apartheid years:

> Of course it was apartheid days, so… you had to be very careful, you couldn't really go out [together], you know. One just had to be careful and work within the boundaries that were forced upon you… We didn't mind [being seen together in public]. It's just that there were some places you couldn't go, never, because of the apartheid system… People always had looks, because it was not something that was seen. If people married

across color they would generally leave and go to America or go to England or Australia, they never stayed here [in South Africa].

Aleemah also describes the discrimination she and her husband faced when moving to a predominantly white area in Durban following their marriage - "because it was under apartheid, the house had to be in my name and I had to go to every single neighbor and get a letter from them to say that they gave permission for us to stay in the house." Although it is difficult to find exact emigration figures from South Africa during apartheid, Aleemah claims that it was not uncommon for white apartheid dissenters – both passive and active – to leave South Africa and move to countries with more liberal government systems and social values. That she and her husband decided to remain in South Africa is testament to their belief that change would be possible for their country.

Though racial segregation was pervasive and bigoted attitudes were common, racism was by no means universal amongst white people in South Africa. For example, Batool recalls her Afrikaans-speaking mother's efforts to instill in her children values of racial tolerance and "the importance of seeing a person for what's in their heart," rather than their physical appearance. Batool also describes her parents as being very supportive of her conversion, and having also made effort to learn about Islam for themselves. Although state-centric history South African history as currently written in South Africa portrays support for the apartheid government as inextricable to Afrikaner identity, Batool describes her family as being politically active, and she sees no discrepancy in identifying ethnically as Afrikaner and voting for the ANC in elections since 1994.

Mariya was in Standard 5 when Model-C integrated schools were introduced in 1992, and explains that though she has "never really been about

differentiating people," her predominantly white community's reaction to integration was "mixed." However, by the time she entered high school, "people started getting used to the idea of racial integration, which was then the norm." Aleemah, Batool, and Mariya each emphasized that they have personally always held unprejudiced attitudes towards people of other races, what Aleemah describes as "seeing people for people." Though each of these women has certainly demonstrated such principle through their subsequent interracial marriages to men of Indian ancestry, it cannot be known if this value was something they truly carried throughout their life, or if it has been imposed upon their memory by these later events.

Forming an identity as a non-Indian Muslim in Durban was difficult for many of the converts. As Aleemah explains:

> One has to remember that in Durban, especially in the past, for those who are not Muslim, when they think of Islam or Muslim, they think of Islam being associated to Indians. So you ask a white person, even a few years ago, "Where is Mecca?" they'll tell you it's in India. The ignorance was there.

Not being of Indian ancestry made Kalila, Batool, Aleemah, Mariya, and Aaliyah more conspicuous amongst Durban's Muslim population, and presented challenges to their being accepted by Indian Muslims, as well as by non-Muslims who shared their racial identity.

Kalila, who was born to a Catholic family of Coloured ancestry, converted to Islam in Port Elizabeth shortly before moving to Durban in 1963 with her Malay husband. In her experience, "Durban Muslims were not as accepting of Malays," and the Muslim community was predominantly Indian. Though she and her husband continued traditions of the Malay culture, she explains that "being in Durban, you get involved with the Indian Muslims," as the reason why her

children, all born and raised in Durban, identify more with Indians than they do Malays. Kalila's experience as a Malay Muslim in Durban seems to indicate the extent to which Indian culture dominated the expression of Islam in Durban.

Batool asserts that "the reality, amongst most Indian Muslim people, especially [at the time of her conversion in 1990], was that 'If you're not an Indian, even if you're Muslim, I'm not going to trust you.'" In her view, "people were really conscious of race." Aleemah agrees that in the local Muslim community "if you were not Indian, you were not a real Muslim." Having received extensive education on Islam, taught Islamic Studies at a university level, and practiced the religion for almost twenty-five years, it is a point of great sensitivity for Aleemah that she is not given equal treatment that her Indian Muslim counterparts recieve. In response to those who question her Muslim identity, she proclaims that "I'm *Muslim*. And that's how I expect… for people to interact with me, as a full Muslim, not as a convert, not as a second rate Muslim, but as a Muslim." Conversely, Kalila states that "I'm so used to being Muslim now, it's like I've been Muslim all my life, like I don't have a different background… People can't believe that I wasn't born Muslim." Despite the difficulty Kalila faced in being accepted into Durban's Indian Muslim community, it does not seem that her identity as a Muslim was challenged. That her experience differs from Aleemah's suggests that associations between Malay identity and Islam existed within Durban as well as at the Cape, while being white and being Muslim were seen as mutually exclusive.

Mariya remembers her Indian mother-in-law as having "a negative perception of white people, that white people were a certain way. She thought that

I would be a trampy girl." Although such preconceptions posed a challenge to the white converts, Batool contends that:

> I think that if you gave people the opportunity to get to know you… if they could start looking past your blue eyes and blonde hair and [laughs] white skin and see who you are as Batool, and not as a white woman, then it definitely does make a difference in how well you're accepted.

Retrospectively, Batool believes that the "tough times" of apartheid were largely to blame in the negative reception she received as a white Muslim. Today, she says "it's much easier, definitely, people's mindsets have changed post-apartheid."

Neither African woman reported facing racism from Indian Muslims, though this could be attributed to the fact that they receive funding for their community service programs through membership of Muslim organizations run by Indian women. Aleemah, who works on the giving, rather than the receiving, end of these organizations, asserts that even post-apartheid, racist attitudes "are still very much the same." She elaborates that:

> Even though Islam teaches that, there is, nobody is better than the other, not in nationality, not in color, only in piety. I can tell you that, well, South Africa's a very racial nation, but [lowers voice] Muslims are very, very racist. And so there is no change. I mean, I know of these black Muslims who have had terrible times, terrible times, and from Muslims. So, yeah, I don't think there has been much of a change, no.

It seems that this racial discrimination is exacerbated by the poor economic conditions of many new African converts, as other Muslims view their commitment to Islam with suspicion. Although Aleemah's statement is supported by the respective works of Michael Mumisa and Preben Kaarsholm, as discussed earlier, this should not be taken to mean that cooperation and positive relations do not exist between African Muslim women and their white, Indian, and Coloured counterparts. In particular, the ILM-SA organization established classes and programs that work to build alliances between women of all races and socio-

economic backgrounds in promoting the empowerment of South African Muslim women. Furthermore, the conversion narratives provided by African women for this study reveal how both rational and spiritual factors were crucial to their converting to Islam. The misrepresentation of Africans' motives for material gain as the main impetus behind their conversions to Islam detracts from convert's intellectual and spiritual agency.

For Aaliyah and Jamilah, converting to Islam also meant being ostracized from their families and township communities. Aaliyah, whose father is a priest in the Christian Zion church, says that her family "does not like me to be studying Islam," and did not support her conversion. Aaliyah describes the harsh, and even violent, discrimination she and her daughters have faced from members of their township community after converting to Islam:

> At home, people, they call me names like "ninja" [in reference to her *abaya*]. And my first child was hit by two boys, because they say they don't like Islam. They say it isn't African. So [my conversion] was really hard. What I believe, is that when you convert to Islam, and you allow, you admit to yourself that "I am a Muslim," there are a lot of challenges that come. It is not easy, especially when you come from people who are Christian, and you grow up in the township way of life in Christianity. So now you change suddenly, and you come to be a Muslim, you have to change the way you dress, you have to change the way you behave. For my daughter too, it was hard. I had to move her to an Indian school. At her first school the children were mean to her because we were Muslim.

As can be seen, Aaliyah withstood these attacks on her and her family, and maintained her faith despite challenges to her safety and identity. She does not believe that being Muslim, and the changes she has made to her lifestyle since converting, excludes her from being African, or vice versa. Nonetheless, because Islam is viewed as an Indian religion, Aaliyah's conversion represents a transgression of racial and cultural boundaries. People's disapproval of Aalisyah's conversion can be attributed to misconceptions about Islam that stem

from lack of personal interactions between Africans and Indians in the wake of apartheid. Aaliyah explains that because Islam is considered to be an Indian religion, many of the people in her community confuse Islam with Hinduism:

> They have gotten the wrong information about Islam, same as me before [my conversion]. They think that if you are a Muslim they burn you when you die. And the Muslims, they don't pray to God, they pray to idols. But that is because they don't know Islam…You see the Indian [Hindu] people have pictures of idols, so I had thought that Allah was like that [laughs]. I didn't know. But no, we [in Islam] call him Allah but he is God. We call him uNkulunkhulu in Xhosa.

The connections she draws between Islam, Christianity, and traditional Xhosa beliefs are significant in demonstrating how Aaliyah was able to translate her spiritual faith to different religious systems.

For Jamilah, the participant who converted most recently in 2011, Islam offers a "return to your [African] roots." Although she was interested in following Islam soon after she moved to Durban in 1981, Jamilah's Jewish employer had dissuaded her from joining an "Indian religion" by telling her that "Africans go to church. Don't follow the Muslim women, it's not wise." However, Jamilah found it difficult to maintain the traditional Xhosa customs she had been raised with after moving from a rural inland town to an urban township and joining a Christian church. In coming to Islam, she explains that:

> Before I converted to Islam, I wanted to know some of the background because I wanted to know exactly what it is. So when I look at my African culture, it's exactly how it is in Islam... It's like they're teaching you that you must be respectful, that you must pray. I remember when I was small my Granny used to say when you pray you must go down to the floor [like you pray in Islam], you mustn't pray on the bed. And if you talk, you mustn't shout. And it's like going back to your [African] culture. You never want to look down on someone, you must take care of the other people. Now that I'm a Muslim I feel like it's the way I was brought up… because in our roots it was like that. It was Islamic. I remember when my father used to say to me, "Don't wait for the visitor to say I'm hungry. You are the one who must say, 'Can I offer you tea? food?'" All the things that are Islamic values are to be you [as an African].

Unlike her experience with the Christian church, Jamilah believes that converting to Islam allowed her to maintain her African culture, and she actively encourages other women in her community to learn about the religion.

Her experience suggests that perceptions of Islam as being "not African" have changed within township communities. This can also be attributed to the influx of Muslim immigrants from Central and East Africa to townships around Durban. In addition to belonging to organizations run by Indian women for Muslim converts, Jamilah and Aaliyah both reported that they had close relationships with African Muslims living in their home communities. Aaliyah states that she finds Islam's capacity for cultural pluralism to be a particularly attractive feature of the religion:

> I like to meet the people from outside places. A lot of Muslims come from Malawi. What I like about Islam is that it takes all different cultures and people from different countries. We are not the same culture, but we are in Islam, and we are one. And some of them they come from different countries, and me I am Xhosa. You meet a lot of different people in Islam, but we all pray the same. The people who could not speak the same language, but they can all learn Arabic. So that's why I like Islam.

Such interactions between Muslims of different cultural and racial groups demonstrate the changing face of Islam in Durban and South Africa. Furthermore, Aaliyah reports that Islam is now more accepted in her African community, and has attracted more women converts:

> Although before I was the only one [in my community] who was a Muslim, now there are other women who have converted, two were my friends. And at first they spoke badly of me choosing Islam, saying it is not my culture because I am African, because they believed Islam was an Indian religion. But then last year they converted, and they tell me that they are happy to be Muslim.

These developments in attitude and perception are reflective of the county's broader social transformations.

It is obvious that converting to Islam brought challenges to all participants. However, these challenges also provide channels through which bonds were forged across racial and ethnic divisions. This principle is supported by Mariya's description of her support group for women who have converted to Islam:

> A lot of us go through the same challenges. Some are different. Everyone has a unique story, you know, that happens to them. But in a nutshell, I think everyone goes through similar challenges, problems with the family, with your own family, with other people, problems with that sort of thing. Not all the women are white, some of the women are Indian, the converts, coming from other Hindu backgrounds, Christian backgrounds, Tamil backgrounds. A lot of them have the same kind of things that their families are not happy, that they're looked down upon by certain people. It's pretty much the same in all.

Women thus assert their common identity as converts to Islam in order to build pluralistic support communities, through which they are able to work together in facing challenges to their family, community, and society's acceptance of their Muslim identity.

Gender in Islam

Although there is a tendency in South African scholarship to focus solely on African women's legal subjugation under apartheid, "women of all [racial and ethnic] groups… were subordinated within strictly hierarchical gendered relations of power and authority embedded within [different] customs and traditions."[247] In the words of Albie Sachs, "It is a sad fact that one of the few profoundly non-racial institutions in South Africa is patriarchy."[248] South African society viewed women's primary role as belonging to the private sphere, comprised of and defined by family, reproduction, morality, the body, and reproductive labor. In South Africa, women are faced with a wide range of issues such as domestic

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[247] Meintjes, "Gender, Nationalism and Transformation: Difference and Commonality in South Africa's Past and Present," 65.

[248] Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity : Women in South African Industry, 1900-1980*(Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press ; James Currey, 1992), i.

violence, child abuse, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, gender discrimination, and poverty. Furthermore, the role of Muslim women has been seriously debated, in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Although Muslims in South Africa are purported to have displayed an increasing conservatism following the country's transition to democracy (as discussed in Chapter One), the experiences and attitudes shared by the women of this study demonstrate how they, as Muslims, support an active role for women in the public sphere. The women's views regarding gender roles in Islam reveal both personal and popular social attitudes towards women in Islam, and how the role of women in Islam relates to gender roles in South African society.

One recurring topic of discussion in my interviews was the question of what constitutes proper attire for Muslim women. As Mariya states, "dressing is a very sensitive issue in Islam." The necessity of the *hijab*, proper dress for women, is much-debated in Islam, and it has also aroused controversy within and between western and Islamic ideas of feminism. Changing their style of dress after converting to Islam, regardless of whether or not they chose to adopt a form of *hijab*, was very significant for the women in this study. The women's clothing choices signified a conspicuous expression of their commitment to Islam, and attracted scrutiny from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Most of the women felt that changes in the way they were treated and perceived by their community and society after their conversion could be frequently attributed to their style of dress. Attitudes regarding what constitutes appropriate dress for Muslim women varied amongst the participants. These differences cannot be drawn along racial or generational lines, and represent personal agency on the part of the converted

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women in interpreting Islamic doctrine relating to women's public activity and appearance.

Of the eight participants, Zarah, Batool, and Aaliyah choose to wear a dark *abaya* and head covering while out in public, and emphasized their personal choice in adopting this style of dress. For them, the *hijab* represents an extension of the protections of women offered by Islamic doctrine. In a country where violence against women is endemic, these converts view Muslim women's conservative dress as a deterrent to assault. Zarah considers Islam to be "so easy for women because it's… such an easy way of attiring ourselves: loose cloak, cover your hair, you don't have to worry about [what you wear]." She recounts that "ever since I became a Muslim, and [even more so] since I went for Hajj [in 1989], I never walk on the street uncovered," though she clarifies that "In my home it's different, it's not that I don't wear my normal clothes, I do, I get into jeans and a top." Zarah's use of the term "normal" to describe the style of dress she wears at home suggests that wearing a cloak is not integral to her identity as a woman or a Muslim, but is a practice which is necessary for women's protection – "there is more [protection for women in Islam] because you don't show your body. That's a way of protection, you're not letting a man look at you."

Layla, Aleemah, and Mariyah decided to maintain western styles of dress after their conversion, with the exception of no longer wearing, as Aleemah puts it, "anything that basically shows too much." Mariya says that prior to her conversion "I wasn't such a conservative dresser [laughs]. [When I converted] I had to get a new wardrobe, buy longer tops that didn't show cleavage and had longer sleeves." Mariya explains that in the context of modern South Africa, the traditional dress of women in Muslim societies is not necessary:

Because of the country that we're living in, it's comfortable to wear jeans and a top, to dress relaxed, but to wear revealing, extra revealing clothes, then it becomes a bit of an issue with Islam… a lot of things depend on the time of the Prophet, and lifestyle has changed a lot since way back then. I would say a lot of clauses [in Islamic texts] were put in place to keep people in line with certain things. And obviously in the Arabic countries, life was a lot different than in a westernized country [such as South Africa].

Although she says that for some Muslims in Durban, "if you don't wear your [head] scarf [mimics shocked gasp], they take that as a huge thing," Mariya considers wearing a headscarf in public to be optional for Muslim women.

However, she explains why chose to wear one at her job as a store manager:

Before I became Muslim, people, they don't take you seriously in the sense that, you know, they talk to you differently. The level of respect that you gain when people know you're Muslim, when you're wearing your scarf, for example, that's why I would always wear my scarf to work. Because the respect from people comes automatically.

In covering her hair, Mariya displayed a piety that commanded a greater level of respect than what she felt she received when wearing her regular clothes, which appears to indicate an absence of social stigmas towards Muslim women wearing the headscarf (as opposed to *abayat* or *niqab*). Mariya's experience also demonstrates how Muslim women manage to preserve and promote their religious identity in asserting their right to activity in the public sphere.

Though at the time she became Muslim, Muslim women were dressing more "conservatively" in Durban, more recently Mariya notices that "a lot of the [Muslim] women have tended to go more Westernized in terms of their dressing." Layla also comments on changes in the style of dress worn by Muslim women – "many [Muslim] women are wearing jeans now, even the older ones, I wear jeans. I'll wear a long top, and then when I go out I wear a scarf." Layla views the *niqab*, or face veil, as belonging to foreign cultures, and not as inherent to Islam. She says that up until the past twenty years, one never saw fully veiled Muslim

women in Durban. The opposing views expressed by Mariya and Layla seem to support scholars' assertions of countervailing trends amongst South African Muslims – one towards an embrace of the country's liberal political agenda, and the other an increase in Islamic conservatism.

As a Muslim, Jamilah says that she was able to continue dressing just as she had before her conversion. She explains that as a Xhosa woman she is expected to cover her body in public, and has also always worn a scarf wrapped around her hair. After converting, she maintained the style of dress she was accustomed to. Jamilah asserts that as a Muslim woman, "you can wear what you want as long as you are covered. It's what's in Islam, if you are a woman, you cover your body from the men."   Before learning about Islam, though, Jamilah had thought that "to be a Muslim woman, you have to cover your face and wear black… When I moved to Durban [in 1982], [the Muslim women] didn't show their bodies." Perceptions on the part of non-Muslims regarding the required dress for Muslim women have also been part of Mariya's experience as a convert - "when I talk to people that find out that I'm Muslim, that are non-Muslim, a lot of them will ask, 'But don't you have to be covered up?'" As the views of these women show, the significance of the *hijab* in one's expression of Islam varies amongst South African individuals. The women's personal views on the *hijab* demonstrate their agency and individualism in determining their public expression of their faith. The diversity of their perspectives also serves to show the pluralism of Muslims in South Africa.

For the women who chose to wear body coverings, their decision in no way precluded them from engaging in public activity and working outside the home. Indeed, all of the women interviewed for this study were adamant that

Muslim women are able to, and do, engage in activity in the public sphere. These opinions again signify a break with the post-apartheid trend towards conservatism among Muslims. Aleemah describes such a reactionary response to this time period's liberal social mores amongst Muslims in Durban in regards to social activity:

> [The community's] becoming a lot more conservative, definitely. For example, my husband will talk about when he was younger and for his family, they used to, at weddings they would have music and dancing and they would have an absolute ball. You know, they would have people would come from India and from Pakistan, and very often they would have these groups, *qawwali* groups, they're sort of little music groups. And singing, and they used to have fun. They went to movies and they partied and they did all of these kind of things and now it's becoming more like, music is haram, movies are haram, there's definitely no dancing at weddings, things have definitely changed.

Aleemah's claims are based on her husband's observations, and it is worth noting that other participants did not report on any such changes in public sphere dynamics, perhaps owing to differences in perspective between converts and people raised as Muslims.

All the participants agreed that Muslim women have a definite social presence in Durban. Because my participant pool was drawn primarily through women's connections with Muslim organizations in Durban, it is somewhat biased in representing Muslim women's public activity. Participants all had careers outside of the home, volunteered with Muslim organizations which sponsored charity and educational programs, and attended social events and religious functions. Several women report that there are many misconceptions amongst non-Muslims regarding the status of women in Islam. Mariya claims that:

> A lot of [non-Muslims], don't think [Muslim women] are treated with respect, a lot of them think women are not allowed a say, that women are not allowed to work. A lot of people assume that women have to stay at home, a lot of people. I think there's, even a large number of people that think that, sort of men look down on women. But what they don't realize

is that women have played an important role [in Islam]. They assume that women are repressed. And that's completely contradictory to Islam.

Though their socio-economic backgrounds varied, the women in this study all began working as teenagers out of economic necessity, whether it was a need to supplement their family income, support themselves, or finance higher education. After having worked in domestic service for twenty years to support her children, Jamilah now sews and runs a tuck shop in order to finance her soup kitchen and *madrasah*.   She explains that, "since I started to do my [charity work], I'm not poor. I'm not rich, but I'm not poor as well, because I can help other people." Most of the women reported that working was a source of pride and enjoyment. In Mariya's experience:

> I've always worked, since the time I was in school. And basically, I enjoy it. I'm the type of person where I need to be stimulated, intellectually. Because I think if I sit at home I will go crazy, you know, I would be bored. And it's healthy in a working environment, and to interact with other people. And my husband believes that as well. He wouldn't like me to sit at home. And he actually encourages me to work, because he believes it's good to, for anyone.

Unlike Mariya's experience, Zarah and Batool were both married to Muslim men who expressed disapproval for their wives working outside of the home. After the birth of their son, Zarah reports that "[my husband] said, 'No you can't go back to work, you have to stay home and look after the child.'" However, because she lived separately from her husband, Zarah felt that it was not his right to keep her from earning her own income, and, as her mother agreed to provide childcare, she continued working as an accountant.

Batool's first husband, a Muslim of Indian descent whom she married a year after her conversion, also pressured her to assume a purely domestic role after their marriage, although she had wanted to continue her education. Unhappy with the limitations her husband placed on her and their daughters, Batool

initiated a divorce and pursued a new career path. She reports that her current

husband, also a Muslim of Indian descent, is very accommodating and supportive

of her work, which shows that a belief that women should be barred from work

outside of the home was not universal amongst Muslims in Durban. Batool

describes the accomplishments she has achieved through her career as "a quite

nice feeling… that gives me quite a bit of satisfaction." Neither Zarah nor Batool

submitted to their husbands' demands, and both demonstrated a belief that wives

and mothers should be allowed to work outside the home.

Layla states that although she believes Islam supports women working

outside of the home, "it used to be women weren't encouraged to. But now

everything has changed…wives are working, they're educated." She believes that

the relegation of women to the domestic sphere has broken down over time, as

when she was growing up "the women in Islam, they never went out of the house.

They had the house and the children. And the men did everything outside, they

had a second life outside." Layla attributes changes in attitude toward gender

roles to increased opportunities for women in the new South Africa – "now,

women are more educated, they go to university and have careers."

Gender dynamics within the household and marriage also reflect the

converts' interpretations of gender and authority in Islam. Although there was

widespread observance of both religious laws and African customary laws during

both the colonial and apartheid eras, there was limited state recognition and

codification of such laws. In regards to Islamic law and jurisprudence, there was

no recognition at all by the state. Marriages conducted according to Muslim rites

were not granted legal status "on the grounds that they were potentially

polygamous, and hence repugnant to good public policy, as defined by the white

minority ruling class."[249] Muslim marriages were denied civil law status and

benefits under many laws, including the Marriage act of 1961, the Divorce act of

1979, and the Maintenance of Surviving Spouses act of 1990.[250] South Africa's

constitution, put into effect in 1996, protects individual liberty and freedom

through a Bill of Rights, and bars discrimination based on race, gender, belief, and

culture.   Despite this commitment to equality, South African courts have still not

recognized Muslim marriages as valid, although the Recognition of Customary

Marriages Act of 1998 recognizes polygamous marriages performed under

African customary law.[251] Without a civil union, women who entered into Muslim

marriages were not given any legal protection as wives under South African law.

    Zarah and Layla both married their Muslim husbands as second wives,

though they did not comment on the legal status of their marriages. They granted

that living in households apart from their husbands allowed them greater

autonomy, but described hostility from their husbands' Muslim-born first wives,

whom they also felt received more respect and better treatment from their

husbands and in-laws. Layla says that at the time she began her relationship with

her husband to-be in 1967, arranged marriages were the norm for Muslims, and

social attitudes towards divorce were very negative – "divorce was disgraceful. If

you were divorced you couldn't go home [to your family]." She believes today

divorce is less stigmatized and has become much more common since her

conversion (two of the participants in this study divorced from their Muslim

husbands in the past twenty years). Additionally, Layla sees that "there's not so

many second wives now. I don't think this generation can afford second wives

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[249] Manjoo, "Legal Recognition of Muslim Marriages in South Africa," 292.
[250] Ibid., 293.
[251] Ibid.

[laughs], but also women are more independent," and are able to choose their own husbands.

Although she has never married, Aaliyah has a positive view on Muslim marriage practices, which she learned about from Muslim coworkers. She explains that unlike in her African Christian culture, where a man must pay *lobola*, or bride price, to a woman's family before they can be married, marriage in Islam "is nothing about money."[252] Aaliyah says that in Islam, "there is nothing more important than love when you marry, you know the person you marry is a good person," whereas with *lobola*, "you marry for wealth but then the man could be bad." To her, the practice of *nikah* is one of the "good ways of Islam" in allowing women more authority in their choice of marriage partner.

Aaliyah's description of Muslim marriage practices indicates that she was unaware of the *mahr*, a mandatory payment given by the Muslim groom or his father at the time of marriage. Unlike *lobola*, the *mahr* legally becomes the bride's property after payment, as opposed to being given to her parents. However, it is possible that the practice of giving *mahr* is not universally practiced amongst Muslims in Durban, as the only participant to mention the practice was Aleemah, who provides this amusing anecdote from her *nikah* ceremony:

> When you have the *nikah*, part of the contract is that you have to have your *mahr*, which is kind of like the dowery that is given to the woman. As [my husband and I] were walking out the door on the way to the ceremony, [my father-in-law] said to [my husband], "Do you have the *mahr*? And how much are you giving her?" and [my husband] said, "[Gasps] I don't have any money on me," turned to me and said, "Do you have money to lend me?" and I said, "Yes," and I gave him twenty five rand. And that's what he gave me. That was my *mahr*, okay, it was my own flipping money.

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[252] Though *lobola* is a traditional practice amongst the Xhosa and Zulu peoples of South Africa which predates the introduction of Christianity to these cultures, Aaliyah identifies the practice as Christian, signifying an important instance of religious syncretism.

The lack of formality surrounding Aleemah's *mahr*, and its absence from other participants' accounts of their *nikah* ceremonies, suggests that the practice was not an integral component of local Muslim marriage customs, at least in the late twentieth century.

Aleemah, who refers to herself as a feminist, believes that household decisions "should be a compromise and consensus" between husbands and wives, and doesn't think that "just because you're a man you can make better decisions than a woman or have more strength." However, she sees that "in Islam, the husband is head of the household, just as in Christianity… and unfortunately that's played out in my home." However, she does not agree with this household dynamic, and views unequitable gender roles as "just wrong." Aleemah's views on feminism seem to be in agreement with Western feminist ideologies.

Conversely, Mariya's interpretation of gender roles in Islam appears to be more in keeping with Muslim feminism as described by Carolyn Rouse in her study on African American Muslim women. Mariya sees Muslim wives and mothers as having greater authority over the household than their husbands – "Muslim women play a very important role in the household. A woman is the 'Queen of the House,' men don't get involved there… women run the show." Furthermore, she explains that women can behave more freely inside their homes than in public:

> If a Muslim woman's out in public, she's expected not to be loud, and not to be overpowering, a woman needs to be humble…be a lady. Inside the home though, you can have your fun and you can do whatever.

This viewpoint suggests that although she believes Muslim women have the right to engage in activity outside of the house, their place of authority lies in the domestic, rather than the public, sphere. However, from a viewpoint such as

Mariya's, these differences in prescribed gender roles do not necessarily disempower or detract from the agency of Muslim women.

Kalila, Zarah and Batool consider the home as also being women's place of worship. Although she grew up attending Catholic services with both men and women present, Kalila states that for Muslim women, "our home is our mosque, as it's not good for women to pray in the company of strange men." Zarah also contends that for Muslim women, "Islam is only in our home… you are not forced to pray because it's prayer time. Yes, men go to the mosque for congregational prayer," though it is also acceptable that "if they can't, they pray at home with their wife and children."   She sees this as a greater convenience for women, which also affirms the importance of the household, which represents women's sphere of authority, in Islam. Batool also says that she prefers to recite her prayers at home, and "grew [her] daughters up in a way so that it's about trying to mix with the men too much." She agrees with the tradition of women not praying at mosque, reasoning that they should not "put themselves and children at risk by going out for services." In this way, the relegation of women's practice of Islam to the home is viewed as an extension of women's protection in Islam.

According to Batool, "if you follow the Qur'an, women are given a lot of rights and respect."   Although the women in this study have differing interpretations of Islam as it pertains to women, each agrees that Islam affords women rights, respect, and authority. As South African women continue in the greater struggle for political and social gender equality - as outlined by the country's constitution - Zarah asserts that "women in Islam are fighting for their rights. You do get problems, but they're not in the limelight like other news." Muslim women, like other South African women, have not been passive in

struggling for authority within their families, communities, and society.

Although women, including many Muslims, played an integral role in political

and social movements, particularly in regards to involvement in the anti-apartheid

struggle, national movements and the new democratic state have given little

priority to women's development. However, Jamilah believes that by organizing

and working together, particularly around Islam, women will be able to achieve

social change -"as women, if we can stand up to help each other, then there won't

be that much poverty. If we can get together and speak, we can even approach the

government. As a woman, this is where I stand. I like the way that Muslim

women can do that." In their beliefs and actions, participants demonstrated

resistance to South African society's internalized classism, racism, and sexism, a

process which is fundamental for building lasting sociopolitical change.

Conclusion: Personal Conversions as Historical Transformations

In April 1994, South Africa held its first universal suffrage general elections, a momentous occasion which marked the close of the four-year process that ended apartheid. During this same month, tens of thousands of Muslims gathered in the heart of Cape Town to mark the 300th anniversary of Islam's presence in South Africa, celebrating the arrival in 1694 of Shaykh Yusuf, the scholar, statesman, and Sufi mystic whom most Cape Muslims regard as the founder of their community.[253] The coincidence of these events is symbolic of how South Africa's Muslim communities have endured through centuries of changes in the country's socio-political structures and environment. The history of Islam in South Africa has constantly evolved, as various individuals, institutions, social and political movements, and local and global traditions contributed to the diversity the country's Muslim population, and their expressions of Islamic faith.

Today, South Africa is a nation which prides itself on its commitment to social, political, racial and ethnic equality. Although the South African state was historically built upon institutions of inequality, pluralistic identities are deeply entrenched in Islam's religious institutions and rituals in South Africa. Furthermore, South African Muslims represent a multiplicity of ethnicities, language groups and social classes. Regardless of social, cultural, racial, and political differences amongst its adherents, the universal nature of Islam has promoted the development of a distinct Muslim community in Durban. Converts to Islam serve to augment the diversity of both South Africa's Muslim population and the history of Islam in the country.

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[253] Mason, "'A Faith for Ourselves': Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape," 3.

The experiences of this study's participants are indicative of apartheid's failings, particularly in regards to the interracial friendships, marriages and cultural exchanges displayed in the lives of participants. Additionally, Muslim women's involvement in South African society over the past half century demonstrates expressions of and solidarity in gender identity which transgress boundaries of religious, racial and cultural groupings. Organizations founded by Muslim women in Durban, such as the Women's Cultural Group, Islamic Guidance, and ILM-SA, have encouraged Muslim women's engagement in the public sphere, in addition to promoting positive intergroup relations in their membership and programs. The activities and objectives of these organizations, along with converts' personal experiences, present a more complete depiction of the diversity extant amongst South African Muslims, and also serve to defy the historical stereotypes of Muslims in Durban. This thesis also serves to provide a firsthand account of Durban's Indian Muslim community from the perspective of an outsider within in a space where racial privilege cannot be taken for granted – a case of looking from the margins to assess the majority. This particular outlook is not commonly found in historical studies of Durban's Muslim population, and allows for greater understanding of the perceptions of this community towards those outside, and vice versa.

My findings provide a greater understanding of identity within the context of South Africa. The experiences of this study's participants relating to religious conversion, race, and cultural assimilation demonstrate the complexities of identity within a country that's national policy worked to pigeon-hole an exceedingly diverse population into strictly segmented categories of identification, and perpetuate personal identity as a static concept. What is suggestive here is

how converts negotiated the challenge of identity and belonging in relation to Islam within a society where being Muslim is generally considered synonymous with being of Indian ancestry, and in which Western prejudice has portrayed Muslim womanhood as being without power and freedom.   Though participants struggled to reconcile their personal sense of self within the limitations imposed by these prescribed identities, the women managed to transcend such stratifications, and thereby demonstrate the fluid nature of religious and social identity.

Such shifting concepts of identity relate back to the process of conversion, and the effect of the process on women's sense of self and personal development. Analysis of participants' narratives demonstrates the crucial complexity that attention to human agency in "everyday life" can produce. Cultural relativists argue that we should not judge one culture's values against another's.[254] This includes comparisons regarding cultural definitions of women's empowerment. As Carolyn Rouse asserts in her study of women's conversions to Islam, "While the cultural relativist approach to the study of culture can sometimes blind the researcher to issues of power and reluctant acquiescence, the relativist approach may work better with respect to understanding a woman's decision to convert."[255] The standards by which an individual's empowerment is judged must emerge from the ideological and social context of the converts or their community.

According to bell hooks, "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity,

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[254] Rouse, *Engaged Surrender : African American Women and Islam*, 141.
[255] Ibid.

naming their history, telling their story."[256] The women who participated in this study certainly do all those things in their recreation of their personal narratives. In converting to Islam, the South African women have demonstrated their agency in opposing limitations set upon them by their families, communities, and society in regards to their gender, background, and ethnicity. Furthermore, each woman claims her conversion to Islam to be a source of personal examination and development. Examples of these developments include participants asserting authority within their households, expanding their knowledge and intellectual interests, and/or working to improve their community, by, for example, organizing an after school care program for local children. Many of the women interviewed for this study have also developed an alternate vision of social justice and personal responsibility as a result of their conversion.

Conversion processes, as related by participants, suggest that conversion is an ongoing process that has impacted multiple facets of participants' lives, from spirituality to social awareness to family to lifestyle. Limiting a study of conversion to only the social motivations of converts does not provide full insight as to the difficulties and developments experienced by converts play out through multiple aspects of their lives, even long after their initial conversion. The life stories recorded in this study provide windows through which one is able to view the complexities and developments of Islamic identity through a period of historical transformation in South Africa. These women's journeys to and through Islam demonstrate ways in which the country's broader social and political transformations have impacted personal experience and development, and how

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[256] bell hooks, *Talking Back : Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 43.

experiences of personal transformation are in turn able to impact upon social developments beyond the individual.

A tendency exists in South African historiography to present apartheid as an all-encompassing regime of oppression and racial segregation which permeated every aspect of society. Though apartheid was undoubtedly successful in institutionalizing racial discrimination, nuanced efforts of South African historians have worked to eradicate such narratives' exclusions of racial plurality in the country's history. Still, much more remains to be done in creating more inclusive historical narratives, and this study is able to contribute to such efforts. The oral histories presented in this work serve to supplement the findings of other methods of historical research, and provide innovations in historical narrative. Examination of women's conversions to Islam is important in teasing out ideologies and performances around race and gender that are highlighted by the act of religious conversion. In the context of South Africa, these conversions to Islam are seen as an act of racial and cultural boundary-crossing. What results from the life histories presented in this thesis is an account of converts' experiences that, in important ways, undercuts the often rote recitations of the impact of apartheid legislation on individuals within South Africa's socio-cultural landscape. South Africa's Muslim communities are far from monolithic. Women's conversion narratives represent how Muslim identity is marked by social diversities and cultural pluralism. Intergroup relations will continue to evolve as South Africa progresses in its post-apartheid nation building efforts, and study of the history of Islam in Durban helps to understand developments that are important in contemporary South Africa.

Glossary of Terms

Abaya   Simple, loose-fitting over-garment, which covers the whole body except the face, feet, and hands. Traditional *abayat* are black and may be either a large square of fabric draped from the shoulders or head or a long caftan. (pl. *abayat*)

Da'wah   The proselytizing or preaching of Islam.

Deen   Literally "religion," it refers both to the path along which righteous Muslims travel in order to comply with Islamic law.

Dhikr   A devotional act in Sunni Islam, typically involving the (sometimes silent) recitation of the Names of God, and of supplications taken from hadith texts and Qur'anic verses.

Hajj   An Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Halal   Any object or action which is permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic law.

Hijab   A veil that covers the head and chest, which is particularly worn by a Muslim female beyond the age of puberty in the presence of adult males outside of their immediate family as a symbol of modesty, privacy, and morality. It can further refer to any head, face, or body covering worn by Muslim women that conforms to a certain standard of modesty. Hijab can also be used to refer to the seclusion of women from men in the public sphere.

Ijtihad   An Islamic legal term that means "independent reasoning."

Imam   An Islamic leadership position. Imams may lead Islamic worship services, serve as community leaders, and provide religious guidance.

Kalifa   See *Dhikr*

Kalimah   See *Shahada*

Lobola   A traditional Southern African custom of the Zulu and Xhosa people whereby the man pays the family of his fiancée for her hand in marriage. The custom is aimed at bringing the two families together, fostering mutual respect, and indicating that the man is capable of supporting his wife financially. Traditionally the *lobola* payment was in cattle, as cattle were the primary symbol of wealth in African society. However, many modern urban couples have switched to using cash.

Madrasah   A specific type of religious school or college for the study of the Islamic religion, though this may not be the only subject studied.

Mahr   In Islam, a mandatory payment, in the form of money or possessions paid by the groom, or by groom's father, to the bride at the time of marriage, that legally becomes her property.

Manyano   African Christian women's prayer group.

Mawlana   A title, mostly in Central Asia and in the Indian subcontinent, preceding the name of respected Muslim religious leaders.

Nikah   An Islamic marriage ceremony and contract. A formal, binding contract is considered integral to a religiously valid Islamic marriage, and outlines the rights and responsibilities of the groom and bride. There must be two Muslim witnesses of the marriage contract. Divorce is permitted and can be initiated by either party.

Niqab   A cloth which covers the face as a part of sartorial hijab.

Purdah	A religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent among some Muslim communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northern India. It is the practice of preventing men from seeing women through physical segregation of the sexes and the requirement that women cover their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their form.
Ratiep	See *Dhikr*
Salah	Prayer
Shahada	Declaration of one's faith - "I testify that there is no god besides Allah and I testify that Muhammad is his Prophet."
Sura	A chapter of the Qur'an.
Ulama	Body of Islamic scholars trained in the whole body of Islamic law.

Appendix

Biographies of Research Participants

Name	Ethnicity	Year of Birth	Year of Conversion	Age at Conversion
Aaliyah	African	1978	2000	22
Aleemah	White	1966	1988	22
Batool	White	1971	1989	19
Jamilah	African	1955	2011	56
Kalila	Coloured	1938	1963	25
Layla	Indian	1948	1976	28
Mariya	White	1982	2005	23
Zarah	Indian	1948	1981	33

Batool
Batool was born in 1971, to an Afrikaans speaking family in South Africa's Limpopo province. Her family was Christian and "staunchly" religious, and did not allow alcohol in the house. In 1980, when Batool was about 10 years old, her mother moved with Batool and her three brothers to Durban, to reunite with Batool's father, who had been working in the city. After their move, Batool's family joined the Mormon Church in Durban. Batool grew up attending church every Sunday and participating in her church's youth group on Friday nights. Although she was active in the church, Batool was not fully comfortable with the Christian faith, and "dreaded" the one service every month where she was required to deliver a testament of her faith. Batool was fascinated by and admired the Muslim women in Durban, who wore beautiful scarves. After completing matric, Batool became friends with a young Muslim woman who worked in a local shop. Batool began spending a lot of time with this new friend, and grew close with her extended group of Muslim friends as well. It was her time with this group that really sparked Batool's interest in the Islamic faith. After almost a year of serious consideration and effort in learning about Islam, Batool made the decision to convert in 1989. She has since become very active in Durban's Muslim community, and at the time of our interviews had been working for a Muslim media organization.

Mariya

Mariya is the youngest woman in this study, and was 31 at the time of our interviews. Born in 1982, she grew up in a small coastal town north of Durban, which was primarily Afrikaans speaking. Her mother is of English descent, and her father's family is Afrikaner. Her parents divorced when Mariya was very young, after which she lived with her mother and stepfather. Mariya grew up speaking both English and Afrikaans at home. Although her family was nominally Christian, they did not attend church and Mariya had no religious education growing up, outside of the official Christian curriculum of her government school. While in high school, Mariya, along with a group of friends, joined a local Christian church. Mariya explains that she was looking for a "support group" and sense of community. However, she felt that the church was "hypocritical," and stopped attending. After completing matric in 2000, Mariya decided to take a position as an au pair in Germany. She returned to South Africa, where she lived with her mother in the Orange Free State for a year before moving to Durban at age 20. Mariya worked as a shop manager to support herself, and it was through this job that she met her husband. Her husband had studied as an Islamic scholar, and is of Indian ancestry. She credits him with having introduced her to Islam, a religion she had previously had no exposure to. Mariya was interested to learn about his faith, and he and his family were very supportive in helping her to understand their religion. Although Mariya had a lifestyle very different from her husband's "old school" family – his younger sister had been pulled out of school after Standard 5 and had an arranged marriage at 18 – they were welcoming of her and her willingness to learn about Islam. Her own family was not supportive of her conversion, and to a greater extent her interracial marriage. However, that did not deter Mariya from continuing her studies on Islam and her relationship. Mariya had her official conversion ceremony three months before her wedding in 2005, explaining that accepting Islam was a decision she made independently from her marriage. She now works for an Islamic organization focusing on women's entrepreneurship, and belongs to a support group of women converts to Islam, who keep in touch via BBM.

Aleemah

Age 47 at the time of our interviews, Aleemah was born and raised in a wealthy area of Durban which had been exclusive to whites. She is of French and English ancestry, and both of her parents were supporters of the National Party. Her two older siblings, however, were supporters of the ANC, and Aleemah credits them with exposing her to different political ideas and people of different racial backgrounds growing up. Aleemah's family was nominally Catholic, although she did not receive any religious education outside of school. She reflects, retrospectively, that she was never comfortable with the concept of Jesus as God, and was often the one to voice opposing views during religious instruction at school. After completing matric at an all-white school, Aleemah entered the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. She worked part-time in order to finance her education, and it was at her job that she met her husband. Although he was not staunchly religious, he came from an Indian Muslim family, who insisted that Aleemah convert in order for the two to marry. Aleemah agreed to have a *nikah* ceremony, and so was officially converted in 1988 on the day of her Muslim wedding (she had a separate "white wedding" as well). She describes this experience as "cold" and confusing, something she was not prepared for. It was

not until her son began *madrasah*, when she was about 26, that Aleemah began to take an interest in learning about Islam. She began by taking classes at Islamic Guidance so that she would be able to answer her son's questions about their faith. These classes then led her to continue her education on Islam, and she returned to school for a Master's degree in Islamic studies. Today she is a university lecturer on Islamic Studies, and remains active with Islamic Guidance's programs for converted women.

Jamilah

Jamilah was born in 1955 in a rural town in the midlands of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Her father was from Swaiziland, and her mother was Xhosa. Jamilah grew up speaking both Swazi and Xhosa at home and Zulu, Afrikaans, and English in school. Both her parents were Catholic, and her family attended church regularly. Jamilah's Catholic father had two wives – exemplifying syncretism between Christianity and Xhosa marriage customs – with 22 children between them. Jamilah was raised in her mother's house, and was cared for mostly by her grandmother while her mother worked in town as a domestic servant. Jamilah describes her family as being very poor and as having faced many hardships. Though Jamilah loved school, her father did not allow her to continue her studies after Standard 6, considering it inappropriate and unnecessary for girls to have higher education. Jamilah was married at age 18, and moved with her husband and children to a Durban township eight years later in 1981. Her husband was, in her terms, "American Christian," and though she was not happy with this faith, her children were all raised as Born-Again Christians.

After her husband died in 1985, Jamilah began working as a cook for a Jewish man in Durban. It was also around this time that she took notice of Muslims around the city, though when she expressed an interest in the religion to her employer, he discouraged her from leaving the Christian church. However, Jamilah's discontent with the Born-again Church was increasing, especially as she continued to experience tragedy in her personal life, particularly the loss of two of her children to HIV in 2004. Her community's struggle with HIV/AIDS inspired Jamiliah to organize a soup kitchen for the chronically ill and to begin a daycare for children who had been orphaned and left in the care of elderly relatives. Her charity work attracted the attention of an Egyptian man from her township. Impressed by her community service, he spoke with her about Islam's tenet of charity, and how her work was an expression of the Islamic faith. Jamilah wished to learn more about this faith, and her new Egyptian friend provided her with reading material and would answer her questions about Muslims' lifestyle. One day in 2011, the man came to her house unannounced, bringing a local *mullah*, an Islamic cleric, who with her consent performed the rites of conversion. Jamilah describes converting to Islam as a "return to [her] African roots," and actively encourages other women in her township to convert. She now runs a *madrassah* program as part of her daycare, and is taking Islamic studies classes through ILM-SA in order to learn Arabic.

Aaliyah

Aaliyah was born in Durban in 1978. When she was three years old, she was sent to live with her grandmother in the Transkei, which was a designated "homeland" for Xhosa-speaking people under apartheid. However, Aaliyah would return to Durban on holidays in order to see her parents, who had separated soon after she

was born. Aaliyah was raised primarily by her grandmother, who was Christian, and attended a Christian school in the Transkei through Grade 8. Aaliyah's father was also a priest in the Christian Zion Church, and Aaliyah describes herself as having been "very strong" in her Christian beliefs and faith. In 1994, at the age of 15, Aaliyah returned to Durban to find work, as her grandmother could no longer afford her school fees. A little over a year later, she had her first child, followed by a second four years later. Their father was a Muslim of African descent, although he was not practicing and did not express any interest in Aaliyah converting or raising their children in the Islamic faith. He and Aaliyah separated after their second child was born.   Of her own volition, Aaliyah enrolled her two children in an Islamic preschool located near to where they lived. Aaliyah was impressed that the Muslims who ran the school were so welcoming to her and her children, even though they were not Muslim. She says that her children were the first to convert, as they learned about Islam at their preschool. They brought home copies of the Qur'an to show Aaliyah, but she had no desire to read the Arabic script. Aaliyah was working in a factory at this time, where she had a Muslim co-worker. Aaliyah says that she and this coworker would often have religious "debates," discussing differences between her Christian faith and his Islamic one.   Aaliyah grew interested in Islam, and expressed an interest in reading the Qur'an. Her children were able to acquire a Qur'an translated into Xhosa from their preschool, which Aaliyah read voraciously. In 2000, she decided to convert to Islam. Although she was nominally a Muslim, she explains that it was not until 2005 that she decided to adopt a Muslim lifestyle, adhering to a halal diet, wearing a full cloak and headscarf when in public, and began courses in studying and reading the Arabic Qur'an through ILM-SA. She now runs a *madrassah* in her home for children to attend after school, and provides lessons on Islam and reading Arabic. Although she had faced much prejudice in her African community following her lifestyle change, she says that now she is accepted and respected, and that other women in her community have since converted to Islam as well.

Zarah
Zarah was born in Durban in 1948, to an Indian Hindu family. She grew up and still lives in a predominantly Indian residential area, home to both Hindus and Muslims. Zarah describes her upbringing as being very strict, and she was not allowed to attend parties or dances.   She attended a Tamil vernacular school outside of her regular schooling, and completed matric when she was 16. She took classes in education and accounting at a technical college, but stopped school after getting married to a Hindu man when she was 19. The marriage did not last a year, though the couple had two children together, and she moved back to her mother's house after their divorce. When she was 24, she moved to her own apartment, and began to rebel against the rules imposed on her at home, going out to movies and dancing with her girlfriends. She became involved with a man she met through friends who was Muslim. Although her family did not approve of the relationship, she married him as his second wife in 1981. Before their first child was born, her husband insisted that she give up her Hindu faith, though he himself was not a practicing Muslim and offered no guidance in the religion.   For a long time, Zarah felt lost, her husband having taken away the lamp she had used for praying as a Hindu, and not knowing the proper way to pray as a Muslim. Zarah returned to work after the birth of her third child, where she met a Muslim

coworker. Zarah asked this girl to teach her how to pray, and though the girl said she was not able to, she gave her the name of Auntie Gaye, the founder of Islamic Guidance. Auntie Gaye ran classes out of her apartment for converted women. At first Zarah was much more concerned with receiving marital advice, as she was not happy in her relationship, than with learning about Islam. Auntie Gaye responded to her grievances by giving her literature on Islam and a recorded reading of the Qur'an, which annoyed Zarah. However, she decided to listen to the tape, and soon fell in love with the recitations. She joined Auntie Gaye's classes, and as she learned more about Islam, became devout in her faith. After a year, she graduated from her studies and was ready to be converted in 1982. She explains that her devotion eventually rubbed off on her husband, and though they continued to have troubles in their relationship, he became much more involved with his family. Although her path to Islam was not easy, Zarah credits her faith with giving her the ability to overcome her personal challenges, and Islamic Guidance with giving her a Muslim "family."

Kalila
Kalila was born in the Eastern Cape in 1938. Her mother was white and of Dutch ancestry, and her father was Coloured. She grew up speaking English and Afrikaans at home, and was raised "staunchly" Catholic. She attended government school through Grade 8, at which time her father fell ill and she began working in order to help support her younger sisters. Kalila worked in a garment factory until her mid-20s. It was then that she met her husband, a Malay Muslim. Unlike Durban, there were very few Muslims in Kalila's hometown, and she had no knowledge of Islam. Although her husband's family had accepted her as a Catholic, she was interested in learning about their religion. Her to-be husband encouraged her in this, and she began taking Qur'anic study classes. Kalila says that she would explain everything that she learned about Islam to her own mother, who was at first skeptical about her daughter's interest in converting. As Kalila explains, "Catholics [at that time] weren't very keen about anyone converting to Islam." Her mother eventually gave her support, and consented to her marriage. Kalila explains that she found many similarities between the Catholic faith and Islam, and eventually came to find that worshiping one God, as opposed to the Holy Trinity, "satisfied [her] completely." Though Kalila had no official conversion ceremony, she adopted a Muslim lifestyle and chose a Muslim name for herself a year before marrying her husband in 1963 at the age of 25. After their "white wedding," the couple moved to Durban, where her husband had gotten a position as an engineer. Kalila had no family or friends in this new city, save for her sister-in-law. She found it difficult to fit in and be accepted as a Malay Muslim in a city where the Muslim population was predominantly Indian, and mostly stayed at home caring for her children. In 1977, along with her sister-in-law, Kalila began taking Arabic classes and studying the Qur'an with Auntie Gaye. She has remained active in the Islamic Guidance organization for 36 years, working as both a teacher and doing charity work, and the organization has provided her with a welcoming community. Kalila also remains close with her sisters, who are still devout Catholics.

Layla

Layla, who identifies as Indian, was born in Durban in 1948. Her family was "staunchly" Catholic, though she was also familiar with Islamic customs growing up. All of her older sisters had married Muslims, and Layla's mother was very accommodating to their new lifestyles, serving halaal food at home and making sure Muslim holidays were observed by the whole family. Layla's father was Indian and from a Hindu family, and had converted to Catholicism when he married Layla's mother, who was of French and Coloured ancestry. Layla attended a strict Roman Catholic school, and after completing matric studied to be a dressmaker. While working in her sister's dress shop in 1967, she met her husband, an Indian Muslim who then worked at a men's clothing store. Although they began a relationship, his family was not accepting of Layla, as she was not Muslim. They arranged instead for him to marry a Muslim girl from Johannesburg. After his arranged marriage, Layla's to-be husband continued to provide her financial support, and bought her a house. Layla was committed to this relationship, and began taking classes to learn more about Islam so that she could convert. She decided that she was ready to convert to Islam at age 28, though it was not until 1984 that her *nikah* ceremony took place. At this time she became her husband's second wife, and continued to live separately from him. Despite her conversion, her husband's family still did not approve of the marriage. After her husband's first wife died in 1986, Layla moved in with him and his two children. Eventually her husband's family came to accept her as his wife, and her marriage remains very strong. After teaching at Islamic Guidance for many years, Layla is still active in helping with and attending the organization's social functions, in addition to working in her husband's store.

Interviews

Batool, interview with author, April 9, 2013.
Mariya, interview with author, April 10, 2013.
Aleemah, interview with author, April 11, 2013.
Aleemah, interview with author, April 12, 2013
Batool, interview with author, April 25, 2013.
Mariya, interview with author, April 27, 2013.
Jamilah, interview with author, June 7, 2013.
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Aaliyah, interview with author, June 13, 2013.
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