Narratives of Conversion in Brazil - Why Black Brazilians Convert to Islam

by Habeeb Akande

Paper for Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies Seminar (IISS) Symposium – *'Black Islam in the Americas'* (February 16 – 18, 2018)

Abstract

This article explores the recent phenomenon of black Brazilians' conversion or "reversion" to Islam since the 1990s, offering an insight into why the number is growing particularly amongst Brazilians from low socio-economic backgrounds. Fieldwork research primarily carried out in Salvador, Bahia in north-eastern Brazil, the article analyses the narratives of Brazilian converts who spoke about the reasons for their conversion. The interviews revealed a plethora of theological, emotional and cultural motivations for conversion amongst Brazilians of African descent. Among these is the belief that Islam is an empowering religion for black people which offers an identity that transcends ethnicity, race and social status.

Noticeably, the reasons for conversion differed amongst the men and women interviewed. Whilst many male converts found out about Islam through hip-hop music and black American activists like Malcolm X, a number of female converts said that Islam's focus on modesty has liberated them from Brazil's highly sexualised society. Many young men said that they appreciated the rules and structure of Islam, and many young women said they were drawn to Islam's spirituality teachings. Respondents described Islam as the "true religion of their ancestors" citing the infamous 1835 revolt of the West African Muslims in Bahia, as a significant factor for their conversion. Others expressed Islam's adoption of strict monotheism with the Muslim declaration of faith, "there is no god but Allah" and the Qur'an's promise of Paradise for the believers as instrumental in embracing Islam.

The narratives showed the complexities of race and blackness in Brazil and how it differs from the United States' 'one drop rule' concept of determining blackness. The article also examines the intersectionality of gender and race, as mixed-race and black Brazilian women explained their "triple threat" experiences of being; black, Muslim, and female in Brazil. In addition, the women describe the various challenges they face such as; wearing the *hijab* (headscarf), interfaith relationships, and finding a Muslim spouse. Addressing discrimination and colourism with regards to marriage, several of the dark-skinned female interviewees spoke about the "obsession" many Muslim men have for fair-skinned women as marital partners. However, despite some of the racism, socio-economic and discriminatory challenges black Brazilian converts faced, the vast majority saw Islam as a religion which had enriched their lives and made them better individuals.

Author Biography

Habeeb Akande is a British-born independent researcher and historian of Nigerian descent. He has authored five books on race, erotic Muslim literature and Afro-Brazil. A chartered accountant by profession and a former student of Islamic history and law at al-Azhar High School and University in Cairo, Egypt, Habeeb's book, *Illuminating the Blackness: Blacks and African Muslims in Brazil*, is a main text book of an undergraduate course about Islam in Latin America at a prominent university in the United States. He is also currently producing a documentary exploring blackness and Islam in Salvador, Bahia in north-eastern Brazil.

Narratives of Conversion in Brazil - Why Black Brazilians Convert to Islam

by Habeeb Akande

Black conversion or 'reversion' to Islam is not new; it has been taking place in the African diaspora since time immemorial.[1] From the United States, to the UK, to the Caribbean, there has been a number of studies carried out on the phenomenon of religious conversions of peoples of African descent to the Islamic faith. However, there is a lack of studies on the conversions of Afro-descendant Brazilians. This article aims to contribute to this field by exploring the phenomenon of Brazilians' conversion to Islam since the 1990s, offering an insight into why the number is growing particularly amongst Afro-Brazilians from low socio-economic backgrounds. The article analyses the conversion narratives of Afro-Brazilians, primarily drawn from fieldwork research carried out in Salvador, Bahia in north-eastern Brazil and Rio de Janeiro who spoke about the reasons for their conversion. Further research was carried out from secondary sources of conversion narratives of Brazilian Muslim converts in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, gathered from online sources, academic studies and face to face interviews.[2] As part of the research for my 2016 book, *'Illuminating the Blackness: Blacks and African Muslims in Brazil*,' and an upcoming documentary about being black and Muslim in Brazil, I conducted interviews with thirty Brazilian converts in Salvador, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo between 2014 and 2017. The interviewees, who were all Sunni Muslim and brought up in Brazil, comprised both men and women, aged between early twenties and late sixties. The conversion narratives revealed a plethora of theological, emotional and cultural motivations for conversion. Among these is the belief that Islam is an empowering religion for black people in Brazil which offers an identity that transcends ethnicity, race and social status.

Who is Black in Brazil?

The question of who is black in Brazil is a complex one that cannot be answered adequately without understanding how the country views race. Brazil is one of the most ethnically-diverse countries in the world, in which many white Brazilians regard their nation as a "racial democracy" where there is little overt racism. However black and mixed-race Brazilians, the descendants of enslaved Africans forcibly brought over during Portuguese colonial rule, are much more likely to be poor and uneducated. *"People aren't used to seeing black people in positions of power,"* said Nubia de Lamia, a Brazilian TV producer of African descent. *"It doesn't exist. They see you are black and naturally assume that you live in a favela (hillside slum) and you work as a housekeeper."*[3]

The 2010 Brazilian census marked the first time in which black and mixed-race people officially outnumbered whites, weighing in at just over 50 per cent (97 million), compared with 47 per cent for whites (91 million).[4] In comparison, the black and African American population only makes up 14 percent (42 million) of the United States' population according to the US 2010 census. Although many media outlets reported after the release of Brazil's 2010 census results that non-whites were the majority in Brazil for the first time in recent history, researchers suggest that Brazil actually may have been a majority non-white country for some time. They say that more Brazilians than ever are self-identifying as black or *pardo* (mixed-race), whereas in the past they would have identified as 'white.' In the 2010 census, 7.5 per cent of Brazilians identified themselves as black, and 43 per cent *pardo*. *"In the past, people would have been ashamed to say, 'I am mestizo,' or 'I am black,' because of the link to*

[1] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/05/black-muslims-islam
[2] Immigrant Latinas and their Shahadah in Miami by Stephanie Londono
[3] http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/in-brazil-a-mix-of-racial-openness-and-exclusion/article/2524608
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/17/brazil-census-african-brazilians-majority

poverty," said Ana Saboia, a researcher at the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IGBE), the institution responsible for overseeing the census.[5] Brazil's growing Black Consciousness Movement has led to more black and mixed-race Brazilians not only self-identifying as 'black' but demonstrating a greater appreciation in learning and embracing their African heritage. Leaders of Brazil's Black Consciousness Movement, which began in the 1970s under the influence of the Black Power movement of the United States, insisted on using the term *negro* (black) for all non-white Brazilians. Brazil did not have the concept of the United States' 'one-drop rule' - a social and legal principle of racial classification asserting that any person with one ancestor of sub-Saharan African ancestry is considered 'black.' Its implications of racial purity being that anyone unable to 'pass for white' in the context of the US racial hierarchy is assigned the lower status of being black. Also known as the hypodescent rule by anthropologists, many black Americans still adopt the 'one-drop rule' theory in determining who is black.

In Brazil it is phenotype, i.e. the way someone looks, as opposed to genotype, that determines who is 'black.' Physical features such as brown skin, *nariz chato* (broad nose), thick lips, *cabelo pixaim* (kinky hair) and *bunda grande* (large buttocks) are commonly referred to as *negro* (black) features, which determine who is considered as black in Brazil. As determining blackness is a subjective matter and open to debate, for my research I relied on the narratives of Brazilian converts who self-identified as 'black,' or phenotypically 'look black' with visible African features, even if they did not self-identify as black. For the purpose of this article, the terms, 'Afro-Brazilian,' 'black Brazilian' and 'Brazilian' are used interchangeably to refer to 'black Brazilians,' irrespective of their hue, unless otherwise stated.

The Rise of Islam Among Black Brazilians

According to some reports, the presence of Islam in Brazil dates back to the fourteenth century, years before the Portuguese first set foot in the country. Researchers have evidence that the Malian emperor, Abubakari II along with his fleet of ships, landed on the coast of Brazil, in 1312.[6] Since the exploration of Abubakari II, there is not much evidence of Muslim presence in Brazil until the nineteenth century when thousands of enslaved Muslims from West Africa were transported to the state of Bahia in Brazil's northeast as part of the transatlantic slave trade. Jewish South-African historian and anti-apartheid activist Ronald Segal said, *"numerous slaves brought from west and central Africa, mainly to Brazil, were Muslims already and converted others."*[7] Despite the fact that Muslims made up a large number of enslaved Africans in late nineteenth century Bahia, their presence had almost entirely vanished within a century of the Muslim-led revolt of 1835. The influential historian and cultural activist Abdias do Nascimento observed that the disappearance of Muslims in Brazil after the slave revolts was because the leading exponents of Islam in Brazil were either killed in retaliation for the revolts, or deported to Africa and as a result, their followers were largely absorbed into other religious groups. It wasn't until the early 1990s that a revival of Islam took place, although at that point there were few converts in the country while there were some Arab-Muslim communities across various Brazilian cities.[8]

According to professor of anthropology Paulo Pinto, the rise of Islam in Brazil is due more to waves of immigrant Arab Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s, when communities organised and constructed mosques, than to conversion. The second generation of Arab-Brazilian Muslims, who were fluent in Portuguese, also helped propagate Islam, as they could

[5] http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/in-brazil-a-mix-of-racial-openness-and-exclusion/article/2524608
[6] Quick, 1998, pp. 14-17 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1068950.stm
[7] Segal, 1995, p. 437
[8] The greatest concentrations of Muslims coincide with the largest Arab-Brazilian communities in the state of São Paulo, followed by Paraná, Rio de Grande do Sul, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. Most of the Muslims in Brazil are of Arab descent from Syria and Lebanon. Brazil's Syrian-Lebanese community, estimated to be seven million strong, is affluent, influential, and largely Christian.

speak to their fellow Brazilians in a language that they understood, unlike many of their parents' generation. Cristina Maria de Castro and Paul Amar examined the Arab Muslim presence in Brazil in their respective works, *'The Construction of Muslim Identity in Brazil'* and *'The Middle East and Brazil: Perspective on the New Global South.'* They show that although there was an Islamic presence in Brazil, it was mainly restricted to Arabs. From the 1990s, with the immigration of African Muslim students and workers to Brazil, religious conversions began to grow as more Brazilian-born peoples started to accept Islam. *"The number of Muslims continues to grow, and most are Brazilians who are converting. We recruit members mostly online,"* said Sami Isbelle, a spokesman for the Beneficent Muslim Society (SBMRJ) in Rio de Janeiro.[9] *"In Rio, there are about 500 Muslim families, 85 per cent of them Brazilian converts who have no Arab links,"* Isbelle added.[10]

It is hard to say exactly how many Muslims there are in Brazil as there have been no official studies. However, experts estimate the number to be 1.5 million, less than 1 per cent of the country's population.[11] It is estimated that there are 80 thousand converts in Brazil.[12] The states which have the largest number of Muslim converts are São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. The vice president of the São Bernardo do Campo-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), Sheikh Jihad Hassan Hammadeh, attributes the growing conversion to Islam amongst Brazilians to the September 11th 2001 attacks in New York, United States. Syrian-born Brazilian resident, Hammadeh, said that more, "*Brazilians investigated about Islam after the attacks and subsequently embraced the faith."* Paulo Pinto added *"Islam was seen as a new form of resistance."* A Brazilian *telenovela* (soap opera dramas, popular across South America) called 'The Clone,' also helped raise awareness about Islam amongst Brazilians after its release a few weeks after the September 11th attacks. Set in Morocco, the popular telenovela showed a *"positive image of that part of the world, with a benevolent Muslim hero,"* said Pinto.

Shaykh Abdul Hameed Ahmad, the *imam* of the mosque in Salvador, Bahia, knows more than most about religious conversions. Since leaving Nigeria in 1992 to become the religious leader of the small but growing Muslim community in the north-eastern city of Salvador, Ahmad has witnessed a number of conversions ranging from Brazilians to African immigrants in Brazil's third largest city. According to Ahmad, *"most Brazilian converts are black. They are in Salvador and Recife, with a minority in Rio de Janeiro."* There are also a growing number of Afro-Brazilian converts in São Paulo where the Muslim population is predominately of Arab descent.

Why Are Black Brazilians Embracing Islam?

In a 2000 study examining why Brazilians are turning to Islam, Brazilian sociologist Vlademir Lúcio Ramos found that converts' first contact with Islam came through books published by *O Centro de Divulgação do Islam para a América Latina* (CDIAL).[13] Another study, carried out by Vera Lúcia Maia Marques in 2003 stated that conversions usually occur in more influential Islamic communities like the Arab Muslims in São Paulo. Professor of sociology, Cristina Maria de Castro, adds that there are many Brazilians who converted to Islam through the Internet, with no Muslim community nearby. In her book *'The Construction of Muslim Identities in Contemporary Brazil,'* de Castro stated that Brazilian Muslims informed her that they embraced Islam after learning about the religion whilst in university and through Muslim

[9] Situated in Tijuca, north of Rio de Janeiro, the *Mesquita da Luz* (Mosque of Light) also serves as a community centre where Muslims attend to learn and study about their religion. The mosque is home of the *Sociedade Beneficente Muculmana* (Beneficent Muslim Society), also referred to as SBMRJ which was formed in 1951. http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-entertainment/rio-muslims-prepare-for-eid-at-tijuca-mosque/

[10] http://www.dawn.com/news/653677/islam-takes-root-in-land-of-bikinis-and-carnival

[11] According to the 2010 national census, 35,167 Muslims live in Brazil, 29% more than in the previous decade. The difference between the census' figure and experts' figure is said to be due to the criteria used by the IGBE in recording a person's faith.

[12] https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/isla-cresce-nas-periferias-mas-ainda-alvo-de-preconceito-18177605

[13] De Castro, p. 1.

friends. Many of the converts who de Castro met said that they took the initiative of converting to Islam after learning about the religion by themselves.[14] A journalist and administrator of the only mosque in Rio, called Fernando Celino, informed me of his personal story of conversion after developing a teenage friendship with a Muslim son of Syrian immigrant parents, which inspired him to study Islam and the portrayal of the religion in the media as part of his journalism degree. The Rio resident soon converted in 2005 and has witnessed multiple *cariocas* (local residents of Rio) also become Muslim.[15] Fernando is now using his media and journalistic skills to help address some of the misconceptions many Brazilians have about Islam.

The data collected from the interviews and conversion narratives analysed for this study revealed four common reasons for conversion amongst Afro-Brazilians, namely; hip-hop music and Malcolm X, the legacy of the *Malês*, female liberation from Brazilian sexism, and strict monotheism. They are summarised below.

1. Hip-Hop Music and Malcolm X

Hip-hop music was influential in the rise of Islam amongst African-descendant Brazilians in the *favelas*.[16] When hip-hop arrived to the Brazilian funk parties in the 1980s, Rio de Janeiro took the electro influence of the genre which led eventually to Miami Bass and the *baile funk.* Whereas Rio's *baile funk* became known for its party lyrics, curvaceous women and violence, the hip-hop scene in São Paulo was revolutionary, socially conscious and fiercely political in nature.

In the *pereferia* (vast urban outskirts) of São Paulo, which are often subject to high levels of crime and unemployment, hip-hop music introduced many Afro-Brazilians to Islam. Some Afro-Brazilians use their musical art form to inform Brazilians about Islam and the African Muslims who rebelled in Brazil's past. Many Afro-Brazilians living in favelas identified with the African Muslim rebels in their fight against the country's establishment.[17] Brazilian Muslim rapper Anderson Dias adds, *"With rap music we can use everyday expressions to reach people who need Islam. Who need to be able to say 'no' to drugs, 'no' to war with our brothers, and to be able to hold your head high against the police without owing anything."*

Islam came to be viewed as the religion of the oppressed and revolutionaries, something which resonated with many black Brazilians. Professor Vitória Peres de Oliveira in his article *O Islã no Brasil ou o Islã do Brasil?* (Islam in Brazil or the Islam of Brazil?) said that a number of black Brazilian Muslims *"are attracted [to Islam] by something they read or from the film Malcolm X and the black American Muslim movement or rap music."*[18]

The connection with the revolutionary figure of Malcolm X and the *Malê* revolt was made when Brazilian *Época* magazine ran a cover story with the headline 'Islam Is Growing in the Periphery of Brazil's Cities,' and asking, 'Young blacks are becoming Muslim activists in response to racial inequality. What do they think and what do they want – the Muslims of the ghetto?'[19] Musslim Ronaldo Vaz de Oliveira, 41, a bearded dark-skinned Brazilian Muslim man from São Paulo said, *"My first contact with Islam was after I watched the film Malcolm X, about the black American leader. Watching the change of direction of his life, and his ideas is what initially attracted me to Islam."* Whilst many white and middle class converts encountered Islam through Islamic mysticism and higher education establishments, it was black American music and activism that attracted black and poor Brazilians to Islam, according to João, a

[14] De Castro, p. 26
[15] https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/deciphering-islamophobia-in-brazil/
[16] Hip-hop is a music genre of U.S. Black and Latino origin. The genre is also referred to as rap music.
[17] 'Islam on the rize in favelas', France 24 report
[18] http://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0100-85872006000200002
[19] Aidi, 2014, p. 32

journalist from Salvador, who embraced Islam ten years ago.[20] *"(Black) Brazilians love Malcolm X because they can relate to his struggle,"* shaykh Ahmad explained.

Similar to human rights activist and rapper Carlos Soares Correia, 40, commonly known as Honorê al-Amin Oaqd, many Afro-Brazilian Muslims living in the slums (*favelas*) were introduced to Islam by the revolutionary lyrics of rappers from the United States who spoke about Islam. Afro-Brazilians identified with the rappers' socially conscious lyrics about being downtrodden in society and found aspiration in their music. The founder of the Brazilian hip-hop group, *Posse Hausa*, al-Amin said, *"Through the [rap] music I discovered Malcolm X, and then the history of Malês. I saw that Muslim slaves were at another level. They were learned, didn't drink, didn't smoke, [and] knew how to write."*[21]

2. The Legacy of the Malês

In addition to black American culture, the struggle of black people, in particular the Malês, is another contributing factor to the high level of black Brazilians' conversions to Islam. During the last fifty years of the slave trade, large numbers of Yoruba people were brought to the north-eastern region of Brazil, making a lasting impact on the culture of that region. Historians have documented that many of the Yoruba Muslims brought to Brazil in the nineteenth century, were more literate and sophisticated than their Portuguese masters. A fiercely proud people, the Yoruba Muslims fought against their enslavement with singular determination and sought liberation for themselves and their fellow Africans. A number of slave revolts took place in Bahia during the early decades of the nineteenth century, but the insurrection of 1835 is arguably the most famous. Primarily led by West-African Muslims from the Yoruba ethnic group, they were referred to by the ethnonym 'Malê', which is derived from the Yoruba word *imale* meaning 'add knowledge' but refers specifically to Muslims. In 1830s Bahia, the word *Malê* was used to identify Muslims who were brought from the Bight of Benin in general but particularly Yoruba Muslims. The 1835 revolt is often referred to as the *Malê* revolt due to the significant role that the Yoruba Muslims played in leading the uprising.

The revolt against the political status quo was planned to take place in the Brazilian province of Bahia on Sunday 25 January 1835.[22] While the unrest was quickly quashed and the revolution was ultimately unsuccessful, the legacy of the Muslim revolutionaries continues to inspire Afro-descendant Brazilians today. An Afro-Brazilian Muslim whom I met in the Salvador mosque called Mahmoud, informed me that it was the *"great history of the Malês"* which initially attracted to him to find out more about Islam. He furthered his curiosity by reading anything he could find about the religion, until he came across shaykh Ahmad of Salvador mosque on TV speaking about Brazil's Muslim legacy. For Mahmoud, the legacy of the *Malês* can be a source of inspiration for black Brazilians, and he explained to me why he thinks the country's elite would prefer that people knew little about their courageous African-Muslim ancestors. *"They (i.e. Brazil's elite) do not want us to be aware of who were the Malês* [sic]*, as they are scared that we are going to tell people who may then make an insurgence and get power for ourselves. So they prefer to keep the history of the Malês hidden from us."*

Recording artist, Ali Jamal Shabazz who moved from eastern Brazil to join a small hip-hop collective in São Paulo remarked, *"We [black Brazilians] have problems that go all the way back to the plantation. And honestly those who die young in Brazil are those who never knew their history."* [23] A number of Afro-Brazilians from the small hip-hop collective have embraced Islam and adopted the last name Shabazz after Malcolm X. For these men, hip hop gave them their political education while the *Malês* gave them their Afro-Brazilian inspiration.

[20] Aidi, 2014, p. 34
[21] Aidi, 2014, p. 30
[22] Curtis IV, 2014, p. 115
[23] Aidi, 2014, p. 31

A very fair skinned elderly man who embraced Islam two years ago, from Salvador, affectionately referred to as *shaykh,* informed me of his conversion story. After finding out that he was a descendant of an enslaved Muslim from West Africa living in Bahia, he wanted to know more. The revelation led him on a personal journey to find out more about his ancestor's culture and beliefs; *"I always felt connected to the Yoruba culture and spirituality but did not know that my forefather was a Yoruba and Muslim! Islam is the religion of my ancestors and being a descendant of the courageous Malês makes me very proud. I am happy that I have found peace and happiness in Islam."* Following the footsteps of the *Malês*, some Afro-Brazilians turned to Islam as a form of protest against Brazil's predominately-white Catholic establishment. The rules and structure which Islam provides were also seen as a way of curbing the *favela's* social problems of fatherlessness, unemployment, violence, drugs and sex crimes.

The intellectual legacy of the *Malês* has also been a source of inspiration for Brazilians to learn more about Islam, and to take pride in their African and Muslim heritage. *"The Malês were brave, intelligent and sincere to their faith,"* João said during our conversation about the intellectualism of the *Malês*, who established secret Islamic schools after their arrival in Brazil. In addition to being warriors, many of the participants of the 1835 uprising were clerics and learned students of religion, who fought valiantly to preserve not only their Islamic identity but their Yoruba culture.[24] Today, Yoruba culture is warmly embraced in Salvador, a city of about 3 million inhabitants located in Brazil's north-eastern state of Bahia. 80 per cent of the inhabitants of Salvador are Afro-Brazilian and the city is considered to be the centre of African culture in Brazil. The impact of the Yoruba people is reflected in Bahian arts, food, music, dance, religion and carnival with the *Ilê Aiyê*[25] and *Olodum*[26] Afro-Bloc carnival groups, formed in 1974 and 1979 respectively, when black people were banned from attending the carnival. Similar to how Afro-Bloc carnival groups like *Olodum* and *Ilê Aiyê*, were formed to promote Brazil's African heritage, through dance, drumming and beauty pageants, the history of the *Malês* have been instrumental in promoting Brazil's Muslim heritage. *"When I discovered the history of Malês, what caught my attention was their form of resistance and their connection with God. It was this form of worship, which is unique, that faced repression,"* Ali Jamal Shabazz said. A Muslim of five years, Mahmoud said, *"I would like to follow the principles of the Malês, who fought for freedom and liberty."* He continued, *"I learnt from the Malês that Islam is a way in which we can find peace for ourselves and humanity."*

3. Female Liberation from Brazilian Sexism

While hip-hop and black history play a strong role in the conversion of many Brazilian men, it is the Islamic teaching of modesty was seen as a form of empowerment for female converts within Brazil's highly sexualised and sexist society that provide a reason for conversion of Brazilian women. A middle-class Brazilian convert I interviewed said that many Brazilians are in fact conservative but are put under a huge amount of pressure in Brazil to conform to a beauty ideal. *"Women want to adapt to what they think men want,"* Rosana Schwartz, a historian and sociologist said. *"Brazilian women are seen in a sexist way, in a more sexualized way, because she was used as a sexual object for so long."*[27] Many Brazilian women are finding solace in Islam and are adopting to dress modestly, as an act of worship for the Creator, *"I wear the hijab because I want to please my Allah, not anyone else,"* said one lady outside of the mosque in Rio de Janiero. Professor of anthropology, Paulo Pinto argued that there is a *"tendency to believe that the Brazilian lifestyle with its sensuality and liberalism would object*

[24] https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/margarita-rosa/duas-of-the-enslaved-the-male-slave-rebellion-in-bahia-brazil/
[25] Ilê Aiyê takes its name from the Yoruba expression meaning 'House of Life'.
[26] *Olodum* takes its name from the Yoruba deity *Olodumaré*.
[27] https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/03/11/289058115/which-place-is-more-sexist-the-middle-east-or-latin-america

to the rules of Islam… but in fact there are many conservative moral and sexual codes that regulate behaviour here in Brazil." [28]

According to World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), seven out of ten converts in Brazil are women. Though the number of female converts is debatable, female conversion to Islam was the subject of an interesting 2012 documentary by Luiz Carlos Lucena, titled *Sob o Véu do Islam* - Under the Veil of Islam. The documentary featured a number of Brazilian Muslim women who spoke candidly about their Islamic faith, lives and personal experiences of wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) in Brazil. *"Brazil is a mix, made up of several different cultures. This mix makes Brazilians very adaptable and tolerant,"* [29] one Muslim woman said. Another convert, Rosângela França, 56, a confident *hijab*-wearing convert from Sao Paulo, remarked, *"I was always questioning, and I only found answers to my doubts in the Muslim religion."* Rosângela, who works as a secretary for an Islamic centre, started to wear the *hijab* three years after her conversion, though she admits she struggled to adopt the veil as *"I've always been very vain, so I was slightly afraid."* [30]

The secretary of the Salvador mosque, Cristina Mendonça Karimah said that many Brazilian Muslim women, particularly those living in Salvador wear *hijabs* around the city and do not suffer much discrimination. One of the reasons for this she mentioned was because *baianos* (people of Bahia) think that the *hijab*-wearing Muslim women are followers of Candomblé (traditional Afro-Brazilian religion), whose white attire and head tie is similar to traditional Muslim clothes. Shaykh Ahmad and several dark-skinned Brazilian women who wish to remain unnamed, spoke about the difficulties they faced when trying to find a Muslim spouse, citing an example of a 40-year-old "*very beautiful black (Brazilian Muslim) woman solicitor with her own place"* who had a lack of marital suitors as many Muslim men prefer younger and light skinned women for marriage. Another female convert confirmed this to me by stating that many Muslims, both inside and outside of Brazil, have an "obsession" with marrying a Brazilian woman but not a black Brazilian woman. *"They want the exotic white Brazilian (Muslim) woman to marry… It's a problem amongst many of the men here, even the foreign Muslims."*

Afro-Brazilian activist and Ph.D. candidate Daniela Gomes explored the issue of African-American men and sexual tourism in Brazil, and the historic fetishization of black women's bodies by white men in the popular blog 'Black Women of Brazil'. On the blog Gomes states, *"our bodies [have] been sold as a product since slavery, because in Brazil, the white woman always was for marrying, the 'mulatta' for fornication and the black woman for work. As Afro-Brazilian women, regardless of whether we are light or dark skinned, over the years we have become the 'mulatta' for exportation, a symbol of the sexuality of a country, a walking ass that is available, the one that deserves to be enjoyed, but who never will become a Mrs."* [31] Gomes' assertion was confirmed by a light brown-complexioned Brazilian model, Aline Monaretto from Salvador, and also by a 'love companion' escort in Rio, who goes by the name Rubi Flow. Whilst looking for a restaurant to dine at near Copacabana beach, I was approached by Rubi who asked for my name and inquired whether I was a Muslim. After telling her that I was, I asked her what she knew about Muslims. She said, *"When Muslim men make love to me, they always say habibi, habibi."* [32] We then proceeded to have an interesting conversation, in which she informed me of the frequency of affluent Muslim men, married and unmarried, who travel to Rio *"for enjoyment with a beautiful Brazilian woman without a condom before going back to his (Arab) Muslim wife."* Rubi was well-aware of the perception many foreigners have about Brazilian women and admittedly said she exploits men for their naivety.

[28] http://www.dawn.com/news/653677/islam-takes-root-in-land-of-bikinis-and-carnival
[29] http://www.dawn.com/news/653677/islam-takes-root-in-land-of-bikinis-and-carnival
[30] http://www.dgabc.com.br/Noticia/137987/vila-euclides-e-reduto-de-muculmanos
[31] https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/2013/12/20/a-message-to-the-african-american-community-on-stereotypes-about-brazilian-women/#
[32] *Habibi* is commonly used as a term of endearment and means 'my beloved' in Arabic

Now 26, Rubi has been working the streets since the age of 15, from which she has made a small fortune through her escort services. An owner of a property in Rio, and previously married for two years to a white British man who was a former client, she is now engaged to black man from the Netherlands. Speaking specifically about Muslim men, Rubi said, *"I am not a Muslim, but I believe in God and respect all religions. I see how Muslim men, Arabs, Africans and Indians, come here all the time for fun. They do not respect black women. They go crazy when they see a Brazilian woman with a big ass, so we take their money. They're stupid."*

Aline concurred, *"Brown and black women are definitely more sexualised here in Brazil. Many men believe that* [about] *black women, especially here in Bahia because of the media and the carnival with beautiful black women with their marvellous bodies on display. You notice it how men adopt a different approach when approaching a white woman, compared with a black woman. They are more disrespectful and sexual when they approach black women compared with blonde white women".*

After attending Friday prayer in the Salvador mosque, shaykh Ahmad told me about some of the challenges 'new Muslim' women face. The shaykh regularly receives queries from Brazilian women about whether it is permissible if they could marry a non-Muslim man due to a lack of suitable Muslim men to marry. Ahmad said the difficulties black women in particular face in finding a compatible Muslim husband is *"a big social problem in Salvador, Recife and São Paulo."* Shakyh Ahmed stated that, *"it is not common to find an Arab marry a (non-Arab) Brazilian (Muslim)"* as Brazilian Muslims of Arab origin tend to favour Arab women or sometimes, fair skinned Brazilian women of European descent. One woman summarised the intersectionality of race and gender, describing the experience of being black, Muslim and female in Brazil as a "triple threat" because *"we are subjected to racism from whites, sexism from men and Islamophobia from non-Muslims, but alhamdulillah* [all praise is due to God]*, I am still a Muslim."*

4. Strict Monotheism and the Hereafter

Several of the Brazilian Muslims that I interviewed expressed Islam's adoption of strict monotheism, with the Muslim declaration of faith, "there is no god but Allah"*,* and the Qur'an's promise of Paradise for the believers as instrumental in embracing Islam. One Muslim I met in Salvador mosque was moved to tears as he spoke of the thought of dying before knowing about the religion of Islam. Another man I met reflected on how he found Islam during his search for a new spiritual path: *"What attracted me the most to Islam was the simplicity of its theology. Islam is very simple. There is only one God who is the Creator and we are His creation."* Another expressed confusion in the trinity, *"how can God become a man and a man become God?"*

Disillusioned with the concept of a 'white (god) Jesus' and Christianity being a 'European religion,' some Afro-Brazilian Muslims found comfort in Islam's teachings of racial equality and the concept of a faith-based community (*ummah*) where believers are brothers and sisters to one another. Amin, one such Afro-Brazilian Muslim, captured this spirit of equality many converts have found in Islam when we spoke: *"Because we grew up in a country that is predominately Catholic, as Brazilians, we could not question the only form of worship which we were taught from a very young age. But we desired a religion that could fulfil our desires to connect with our Creator properly. Many of us searched for this by studying various religions, such as Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Candomblé, but none of them cured our spiritual anxieties. We know of God's existence but we did not know how to worship Him. After finding about the Islam's teachings of there being only one God, it did not take long to become a Muslim. I soon found a mosque and went inside where I was well received by the*

Muslim community… The mosque is the mother of the community. It brings people together at different times and strengthens our fellowship and worship of God."

Raised as a Catholic, the concept of a man, especially a white man, being God did not sit well with Abdullah from Bahia. He recalls the agitation he felt from a very young age of watching his relatives pray to white man in a gold-laden church, built by enslaved Africans, whilst he and his family were living in abject poverty. After learning about the simplicity of Islamic theology, summarised in the 112th Qur'anic chapter called 'Sincerity,'

> "*Say, "He is Allah, [who is] One,*
> *Allah, the Eternal Absolute.*
> *He neither begets nor is born,*
> *Nor is there to Him any equivalent."*[33]

Abdullah was of no doubt that this was the religion for him. Since becoming a Muslim, he has travelled to live and study about his faith in Sudan and now is a fluent speaker of Arabic.

A heavy-set, dark-skinned man with prominent 'African' features, Abdullah would undoubtedly be identified as black in Brazil, though he prefers to identify himself as a *"Muslim first, black second and Brazilian third.*" He did acknowledge racism is still an issue in some of Brazil's Muslim communities, particularly in São Paulo, which is predominately of Arab descent, but prefers to concentrate on building the hearts and minds of Brazilian Muslims rather than concentrating on *"people who have the disease of racism in their hearts. It is their problem, not mine."* He also questioned why black people in Brazil are constantly referred to as just descendants of slaves, instead of descendants of scholars. As Abdullah noted, *"our ancestors who were forced to come to Brazil were enslaved, they were not slaves in Africa! Many of them were scholars too, brilliant learned men, but they are just described as slaves all the time. They were more than slaves! Many of them were slaves of Allah. A slave of Allah is more free than anyone* [sic]*. This is true liberation we should remember and our real purpose in life – to worship Allah."*

Challenges for Black Brazilian Muslims

After conversion, many black Muslims are faced with challenges in practising their religion, even within the Muslim community. Personal trainer José Adelson explained such conflicts to me, *"Before I became a Muslim, the only thing I knew about Islam was what the media told me – a bearded man with a grenade in one hand saying Allahu Akbar (God is Great) before he blows himself up. Terrorists. They destroy people and places. I later learnt and realised the difference between Islam and Muslims. They are different. They should not be, but they are. Because the human element always speaks louder. I found out that (religious) extremism had nothing to do with Islam."* Former rapper Honorê al-Amin said, *"I thought Islam was a religion specifically for Arabs and that it did not have any links with any other ethnic group or people. I thought as if every ethnic group had their own religion. This type of thinking was broken when we study our own history and can see many ethnic groups follow the religion of Islam."*

Islam has been growing in Brazil in the wake of the religion's teaching of racial equality and social justice. In particular, conversion is growing in the outskirts of major cities in Brazil, amongst men and women from low socio-economic backgrounds. Some newly converted Muslims have also had to cope with prejudice from neighbours and family members, as well as online abuse such as *"woman-bomb," "terrorist"* and *"go back to your country"* are some regular comments received on social media networks.[34] In the Muslim

[33] Qur'an 112 : 1-4
[34] https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/isla-cresce-nas-periferias-mas-ainda-alvo-de-preconceito-18177605

communities of São Paulo, it is common for the 'new Muslims' to complain of the 'Muslims by birth' who are mostly Arabs and do not make the converts feel welcome. According to sociologist Vitória Peres de Oliveira, it is very probable that the effort that these 'new Muslims' make to promote Islam is partly caused by the fact that they do not feel part of a close community that gives them plausibility. The 'new Muslim' women of Juiz de Fora in the south-eastern Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, said that the Arab (Lebanese) women feel that they are more complete Muslims than the Brazilian converts. Ethnic conflicts appear to exist wherever there is an active community of immigrants. However, the Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador does not currently appear to have this problem, owing to the presence of a large number of converts.[35]

During my discussions with Shaykh Ahmad of the Salvador mosque, he informed me of a visit of a group of Black Nationalist Muslims from the United States. They offered to finance the mosque but on the condition that he expelled non-whites from the mosque so that it would be exclusively for black Muslims. The shaykh immediately refused, stating that Islam is a religion for all peoples and the mosque is welcome to all Muslims, irrespective of their skin colour or ethnic background. He confirmed that he also rejected another similar offer from a well-known Muslim-revert in America to again make the mosque exclusively black. Abdullah, a much-travelled Brazilian Muslim, went on to explain the importance of foreigners, especially Americans, understanding and respecting Brazilian culture, *"Brazil is not the US! Not all of us view race the way they do. We do not need an American approach to solve our problems with racism. Our culture is Brazilian, but it varies depending on what part of Brazil you go. The black Brazilian culture in Salvador is not the same as the black Brazilian culture in São Paulo or Rio. Yes, we all experience racism, but the black experience is not the same everywhere in Brazil."*

The 'triple threat' of being discriminated against based on race, gender and faith which black Brazilian Muslim women are subjected to, is also an issue amongst black evangelical woman in the world's most populous Catholic country. As Brazilian professor of pan-Africanism, Elba Oliveira Chrysostomo, also known as Makeda Foluke Nabulungi, observed black Brazilian women are, *"'Beautiful, lovely, intelligent, "a blessing of God", but rejected.' This is the phrase of thousands of black women living within evangelical churches. They may be beautiful, lovely, intelligent, 'a blessing for lives of (black) brothers - but they are not worthy of marriage."* Similar to black Muslim women, black women of the evangelical church are subjected to racism, sexism and discrimination because of their faith in the predominately Catholic country. Nabulungi continues, *"unsurprisingly, the black woman is, for the most part, rejected by the black man and exploited in various ways by the white man. Within the evangelical church this is no different. Historically, the image of the black woman in Brazil was created behind the stereotype of beauty and sensuality: a totally sexualized image…many evangelical blacks are no different than some blacks outside the churches both like to display a white woman as if she were a trophy, and this often happens not because they are in fact in love with them, but it is as if this gives them a higher social standing for being with a white woman. They still have sex with black women, but they will hardly ever marry one of them. Western machismo certainly repeats itself within the churches".*[36] João, a dark-skinned convert admits this phenomenon also exists amongst Brazil's Muslim community, *"the truth is many of us black men have been conditioned from a young age that the white blonde woman is the best to marry. I do love and prefer black women in the bedroom, but my former and current wife are both white women. I know it's a problem."*

Paulo Sergio dos Santos, president of the Brazilian Islamic Development Core, believes that Islam can help save the lives of many young poor Brazilians who are involved in drugs and crime, *"I am not saying the Muslim communities do not have any problems, but its*

[35] http://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0100-85872006000200002
[36] http://cnncba.blogspot.co.uk/2007/09/mulher-negra-evanglica-e-rejeio-do.html

problems do not cause the death of so many teenagers of African origin or the poor." Dos Santos adds, *"Islam is spreading really fast in Brazil. We are seeing many people convert to Islam, looking to Islam for knowledge, and to assert religious beliefs."* Maryam is an example of such a person, having embraced Islam in 2006 when she was in high school after extensive studying of Islamic spirituality. Speaking about her life as a Muslim, Maryam said that it's *"easy to live as a Muslim and wear a hijab in Salvador"* as Brazilians in the northeast are very tolerant and respectful of people's different religions, although she did admit that some people think she's a foreigner and ask her questions about her religion. Maryam attributed this to a lack of information about the *hijab,* and the misconceptions people have about her faith, *"here the media only show Muslims as Arabs, or a religion that is just associated with war and violence. They don't show the beauty of Muslims and Islam on Brazilian TV."* She added, *"When Brazilians find out that Islam is in other countries around the world, they would be more likely to embrace the faith…we [Brazilian Muslims] are the same people as other Brazilians. We share the same culture, we just have a different religion."*

Conclusion

The interviews and conversion narratives revealed a plethora of theological, emotional and cultural motivations for conversion to Islam amongst Brazilians of African descent. Experts argue that the Islam's message of racial equality and social justice is one of the main reasons behind the growth of Islam in Brazil's peripheries. The interviewees also described some of the difficulties they face living as a black Brazilian Muslim in Brazil, from within and outside Muslim communities. However, despite some of the racism, socio-economic and discriminatory challenges black Brazilian converts faced, the vast majority of interviewees saw Islam as a religion which had enriched their lives and made them better individuals.

Bibliography

Aidi, Hisham D., *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*, New York: Vintage, 2014

Akande, Habeeb, *Illuminating the Blackness: Blacks and African Muslims in Brazil*, London: Rabaah Publishers, 2016.

Amar, Paul [ed.], *The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014.

Curtis, Edward E., 2014, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora*, The University of North Carolina Press

De Castro, Cristina Maria, (translated by Rodrigo Braga Freston) *The Construction of Muslim Identities in Contemporary Brazil*, Lexington Books: Plymouth, 2013.

Diouf, Sylviane A., *Servants of Allah: African Muslims enslaved in the Americas*, New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Farid, A. A., Muhammad Shareef bin, *The Islamic Slave Revolts of Bahia, Brazil*, Pittsburgh, PA: Institute of Islamic-African Studies, 1998

Gomez, Michael A., *Black Crescent: The Experience of African Muslims in the Americas*, New York Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Quick, Abdullah Hakim, *Deeper Roots: Muslims in the Americas and the Caribbean From Before Columbus To The Present*, London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1998

Reis, João José, *Rebelião Escrava no Brasil: A História do Levante Does Malês em 1835*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2003

Reis, João José, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995

Segal, Ronald, *The Black Diaspora: Five Centuries of the Black Experience Outside Africa*, London: Faber & Faber, 1995

Online sources

Why are black people turning to Islam? – Richard Reddie
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/05/black-muslims-islam

Relig. soc. vol.2 no.se Rio de Janeiro 2006, *Islam in Brazil or the Islam of Brazil? O Islã no Brasil ou o Islã do Brasil?* – Vitória Peres de Oliveira
http://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0100-85872006000200002

Deciphering Islamophobia in Brazil – Catherine Osborn
https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/deciphering-islamophobia-in-brazil/

Islam in the Slums of São Paulo, Brazil
https://ummahwide.com/islam-in-the-slums-of-são-paulo-brazil-11283c2accf7

Rio Muslims Prepare for Eid at Tijuca Mosque
http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-entertainment/rio-muslims-prepare-for-eid-at-tijuca-mosque/

Islam takes root in land of bikinis and Carnival
http://www.dawn.com/news/653677/islam-takes-root-in-land-of-bikinis-and-carnival

'The Islamic presence in Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro' – Amanda Dias
https://globalprayers.info/uploads/media/Dias_Islamic_Presence_in_Brasil_Citation_Recommendation.pdf

1° Parte do Video "Brasileiros revertidos" da CDIAL Produçoes (YouTube)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-PPFi4kj1s&t=522s

2° Parte do video "Brasileiros revertidos" CDIAL Produções (YouTube)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e89kSUPT31Y

Muslim Women Living in Brazil – Challenges for the Practice of a Culturally Sensitive Medicine
http://ijgws.com/journals/ijgws/Vol_2_No_3_September_2014/5.pdf

'A mulher negra evangélica e a rejeição do homem negro evangélico' – Elba Oliveira Chrysostomo
http://cnncba.blogspot.co.uk/2007/09/mulher-negra-evanglica-e-rejeio-do.html

'Brazil: Islam on the rize in the favelas' – France24 English (YouTube)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMtnPFSwMpg

'A message to the African American community on stereotypes about Brazilian women' – Black Women of Brazil blog
https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/2013/12/20/a-message-to-the-african-american-community-on-stereotypes-about-brazilian-women/#

'Immigrant Latinas and their Shahadah in Miami' – Stephanie Londono
https://lacc.fiu.edu/research/publications/commissioned-paper-londono.pdf

In Brazil, a mix of racial openness and exclusion
http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/in-brazil-a-mix-of-racial-openness-and-exclusion/article/2524608

Africa's greatest explorer – Joan Baxter
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1068950.stm

Which Place Is More Sexist: The Middle East Or Latin America? – Lulu Garcia Navarro
https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/03/11/289058115/which-place-is-more-sexist-the-middle-east-or-latin-america

Vila Euclides é reduto de muçulmanos
http://www.dgabc.com.br/Noticia/137987/vila-euclides-e-reduto-de-muculmanos

Brazil census shows African-Brazilians in the majority for the first time – Tom Phillips
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/17/brazil-census-african-brazilians-majority

Islã cresce nas periferias, mas ainda é alvo de preconceito
https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/isla-cresce-nas-periferias-mas-ainda-alvo-de-preconceito-18177605

Adeptos do islã, rappers aliam música e religião na periferia
https://vejasp.abril.com.br/cidades/adeptos-do-isla-rappers-aliam-musica-e-religiao-na-periferia/

Mesquita fundada em favela de SP resiste ao preconceito com fé e cultura
https://ponte.org/mesquita-islamica-fundada-em-favela-de-sao-paulo-resiste-ao-preconceito-com-fe-e-cultura/

Du'as of the Enslaved: The Malê Slave Rebellion in Bahía, Brazil – Margarita Rosa
https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/margarita-rosa/duas-of-the-enslaved-the-male-slave-rebellion-in-bahia-brazil/