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## **The Latino American Da’wah Organization and the “Latina/o Muslim” Identity in the United States**

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### **Introduction: LADO and the Growth of the U.S. Latina/o Muslim Community**

Latina/os have been slowly and quietly converting to Islamic communities in the U.S. since at least the 1920s. Many conversions came through contact with African-American-majority Muslim movements such as Moorish Science Temple, the Ahmadiyya Movement, the Nation of Islam, and the African-American Sunni groups that emerged in New York City and Washington, D.C. in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1965, a small number of Latina/os also come to international Islam through relationships with, especially marriage to, Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> See Patrick D. Bowen, “Early U.S. Latina/o – African-American Muslim Connections: Paths to Conversion,” *Muslim World* 100/4 (2010) (forthcoming).

immigrants, particularly with those from South Asia and Yemen who had come to the Southwest U.S. and Arabs who had moved to the Detroit, Michigan and Chicago, Illinois areas.<sup>2</sup> While we know very little of these early U.S. Latina/o converts, the examples we do have suggest that those who embraced Islam did so as individuals or, at most, as nuclear families, and generally took on the ethnic identity of the group into which they converted; currently we have no confirmed examples of larger groups of people converting together, let alone any widely-shared sense of a “Latina/o Muslim” identity. Over time, as Muslim immigration increased and more and more Latina/os embraced the religion, a handful of Muslim immigrants began to take seriously the possibility of converting Latina/os and organized proselytization efforts.<sup>3</sup> And while these groups had very limited success within U.S. borders, they did slightly raise the numbers of Latina/o Muslims in the U.S. which improved the probability that Latina/o Muslims would encounter each other. In 1975, a

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<sup>2</sup> For South Asian marriages, see Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 62-67, 130 n. 36, though Leonard only records one instance of an actual conversion through the Punjabi-Mexican marriages taking place in the early twentieth century, and one instance of a possible conversion. On Yemeni-Mexican marriages, see Jonathan Friedlander, “The Yemenis of Delano: A Profile of a Rural Islamic Community,” in *Muslim Communities in North America*, eds. Y. Y. Haddad and J. I. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 441. In Detroit and Chicago, Mexicans were one of the most popular non-Arab ethnic groups from which Arab Muslim marriage partners were selected. See Atif Amin Wasfi, “Dearborn Arab-Moslem Community: A Study of Acculturation” (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1964), 177 and Asad Husain and Harold Vogelaar, “Activities of the Immigrant Muslim Communities in Chicago,” in *Muslim Communities in North America*, eds. Y. Y. Haddad and J. I. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 232. It should be noted that only Leonard’s study actually specifically mentions conversion, and if her figures are representative at all of other early conversions through marriage, the total number of this kind of convert are relatively small.

<sup>3</sup> For some examples, see M. K. Hermansen, “The Muslims of San Diego,” in *Muslim Communities in North America*, eds. Y. Y. Haddad and J. I. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 184, 189.

number of Latina/o Muslims, some of whom had experiences (positive and negative) with immigrant Muslims, came together with others who had been involved in the African-American Sunni groups and formed the Alianza Islamica in Harlem, the first U.S. Latina/o Muslim organization.<sup>4</sup> In other areas where Muslims and Latina/os were in close proximity, the numbers of converts continued to expand and a handful of support groups for Latina Muslim wives of immigrant Muslims, as well as a few more generally-oriented Latina/o Muslim organizations, developed.<sup>5</sup> By the turn of the century, there were perhaps ten U.S. Latina/o Muslim associations and Latina/os had become a significant presence in many mosques all over the country, especially in cities with high concentrations of Latina/os.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bowen, "Early U.S. Latina/o"; Bill Weinberg, "Muslims in the Americas Face Scrutiny," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (May/June 2003): 25; Daniel J. Wakin, "Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam are Increasing – Many in City Were Catholics Seeking Old Muslim Roots," *New York Times*, January 2, 2002; and Juan Galvan, "FAQs About the LADO Group," *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2007), accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k7.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Ramirez, "New Islamic Movement Seeks Latino Converts," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1999; Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180-83; Marc Ferris, "To 'Achieve the Pleasure of Allah': Immigrant Muslims in New York City, 1893-1991," in *Muslim Communities in North America*, eds. Y. Y. Haddad and J. I. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 221. These groups were often for wives of immigrant Muslims. Hermansen notes the presence of about one hundred Sunni Latina/os in San Diego, "most" of whom were wives of immigrant Muslims and had converted within the last ten to fifteen years (184).

<sup>6</sup> Ramirez; Samantha Sanchez, "Islamic Resurgence in Spain and Beyond," *The Latino Muslim Voice* (July-September 2002), accessed August 19, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k2.html>; and Juan Galvan, "FAQs About Latino Muslims, Revisited," *The Latino Muslim Voice* (October-December 2006), accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k6.html#3>. Sanchez and Juan Galvan relay that a 1997 American Muslim Council report estimated there to be 40,000 U.S. Latina/o Muslims. I believe this estimate to be somewhat high when taking into account how isolated many U.S. Latina/o Muslims were in major cities as well as the fact that Muslim organizations, who may have an interest in presenting inflated statistics, frequently give estimates much higher than outside researchers. For a discussion of this latter issue, see Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2 n. 2.

Despite the presence of Latina/o Muslim individuals and small groups scattered throughout the U.S., oftentimes new Latina/o converts and those who were considering conversion were still unaware of other Latina/o Muslims. In the mid-1990s, a handful of these individuals independently began to explore the burgeoning Muslim internet chat rooms and message boards, and it was there where they encountered each other. The internet was the medium through which Juan Alvarado, Saraji Umm Zaid, and Samantha Sanchez—all who happened to live in New York—came into contact. These three new Latina/o Muslims became anchors in a gradually-growing circle of Latina/o Muslims that exchanged emails, sharing their thoughts, news articles, and other related stories in what was essentially an early Latina/o Muslim listserv. Soon, there was a desire within this small online community to obtain Spanish-language literature, to give Latina/o Muslims a place for their voices to be heard, and to spread their new religion to other Latina/os—what Muslims refer to as *da'wah*, meaning “calling” people to the Islamic faith. With these goals in mind, they began to consider creating a formal organization. In September 1997 a name was given to this group: the Latino American Da'wah Organization (LADO).<sup>7</sup> That year, they developed a website with general resources for Latina/o Muslims and Sanchez began a reader-contributed online newsletter, originally as a monthly, but low participation led to irregular publication.<sup>8</sup> Over the next four years LADO grew through internet visits to their site and word-of-mouth, with members putting their local mosques and other Islamic organizations in touch with

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<sup>7</sup> Juan Alvarado, “The LADO Genesis” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2005), accessed August 19, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k5.html#2>.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Alvarado and Juan Galvan, E-mail messages with the author, January 24 and 31, 2010. The current website is <http://latinodawah.org/>.

LADO, so that by 2001 members began attending various Latina/o Muslim gatherings and LADO was endorsed by and began working with both the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA). In 2002 LADO coordinated the development of ISNA's magazine's (*Islamic Horizons*) special issue on Latina/o Muslims, marking the first time a Muslim magazine was dedicated to American Latina/o Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

LADO is an entirely volunteer-based, loosely-structured organization that has run on almost no outside funding. There are neither regular meetings nor a strict hierarchy of leadership. It welcomes all Muslims who wish to join and has developed affiliations with Latina/o Muslims outside of the U.S., making total membership close to 5,000 and the website garners 90,000 hits per month.<sup>10</sup>

In 2001, a newly-converted Texan, Juan Galvan, was disappointed with the low numbers of Latina/o Muslims in Texas. He was also

facing many internal issues and questions about my identity as a Latino and as a Muslim, and I knew I could not be the only Latino Muslim with these concerns. After becoming a Muslim, I thought that I might be the only Latino Muslim in Austin, Texas. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to learn more about Latino Muslims. I wanted to know about their dawah efforts around the United States, especially in Texas. And, that is how I came upon LADO. I was thoroughly excited about the prospects of working with this organization. After coming into contact with Samantha Sanchez, the LADO President, I told her about some of my ideas and concerns. "That's what LADO is for," she

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<sup>9</sup> "Accomplishments," LADO, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/about/accomplishments.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Galvan, "FAQs About...Group."

responded. And, I would later meet several Latino Muslims from not only Austin, but from Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Brownsville, El Paso, etc.<sup>11</sup> Galvan began to volunteer with LADO, working with Sanchez and others to re-establish the newsletter, which was then given the name *The Latino Muslim Voice* and began publication as a quarterly, with Galvan doing a large amount of the editorial work since that time.<sup>12</sup> From 2002 on, the *Voice* has been consistently published online, making it one of the longest-lasting U.S. Latina/o Muslim periodicals.<sup>13</sup> As seen in the stories of its founders and its phenomenal growth, LADO and the *Voice* have served to not only help make non-Latina/o Muslims more aware of the Latina/o Muslim presence, but also to connect disparate Latina/o Muslims, and in the process have created an “imagined community” on a scale that might not have been possible without the internet.

### ***The Latino Muslim Voice: Creating Culture and Identity***

In the fall of 2009 an east coast Latina, Krystal (who has asked to keep her last name anonymous), was considering converting to Islam. She had recently begun active research into the religion after having a particularly insightful conversation about Islam with a Middle Eastern Muslim student from her college class, but she was concerned about whether she

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<sup>11</sup> Juan Galvan, “So That You May Know Who I Am,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2007), accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k7.html#8>.

<sup>12</sup> Galvan, “FAQs About...Group.” Galvan has been the author who has contributed the most articles to the newsletter.

<sup>13</sup> Galvan notes that there had been other Latina/o Muslim groups to attempt newsletters, including Alianza Islamica and a group out of Washington, D.C. Juan Galvan, E-mail message with the author, January 21, 2010.

would be able to maintain her Latina identity if she converted. So she began to talk to other Muslims at the school and researched about Islam and Latina/os online when she came across the LADO website. Krystal took comfort in seeing that many other Latina/os had embraced Islam while keeping their Latina/o identity, and this helped her soon decide to formally convert by making her profession of faith, the *shahada*, the following winter.<sup>14</sup>

Individual Muslims like Krystal throughout the U.S. have had similar experiences. Typically, Latina/os first come to Islam through social ties with non-Latina/o Muslims who introduce the new converts to the tradition and community.<sup>15</sup> Usually new Latina/o Muslims in this situation, who are exposed to an Islamic discourse which makes little emphasis on the cultural connections between Islamic Spain and Latin American culture, do not express a strong identification with a Latina/o Muslim identity, and rarely are they aware of the Islamic heritage in Spain and Latina/o culture.<sup>16</sup> An examination of conversion narratives in the *Voice* and on another website run by Galvan<sup>17</sup> reveals that out of the twenty-eight different individuals who wrote these narratives, only six made any mention of this cultural heritage tie to Islam, and three of those were people were directly affiliated with LADO or another Latina/o Muslim group. It appears that the Islamic heritage of Latina/o culture is not the

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<sup>14</sup> Phone interview with the author conducted August 18, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Galvan, "FAQs About...Revisited."

<sup>16</sup> For instance, in 2008-2009 I interviewed three Latina/o Muslims who were attending a Denver, CO mosque. Two expressed no knowledge of Islam's influence on Latina/o culture, and the other had heard of it but considered that influence not very significant, neither on the culture, nor in her identity as a Muslim.

<sup>17</sup> Hispanic Muslims, Accessed August 19, 2010, <http://hispanicmuslims.com/>.

initial concern of converts who instead stress Islam's simple and rational religious doctrines (as compared with what they see as confusing or incorrect doctrines in Christianity, such as the Trinity) and a sense of a universal family among Muslims. However, some potential converts, like Krystal, begin to have reservations about how they can be Muslim while still being Latina/o, some simply encounter the history of Spanish Muslims while doing general research on Islam, while others begin to experience some stereotyping from immigrant Muslims and thus begin to look for other sources to legitimate their own identity.<sup>18</sup> All of these factors can push new or potential converts to seek out other Latina/o Muslims to see either how those Muslims handled similar issues or for intellectual and/or moral support.

Religious conversion is a process of identity change that takes time.<sup>19</sup> Hjamil A. Martinez-Vazquez, in the first book written about U.S. Latina/o Muslims, stresses that they *develop* an identity as "Latina/o Muslims" through a process of gaining a "new" personal and cultural memory which they consider as continuous with their old ones.<sup>20</sup> For many, this process includes overcoming difficulties of correlating identities by seeking outside sources (other people or various media) that may provide discourses or strategies to deal with these issues. It is here, as we saw with the example of Krystal, where the LADO website and the *Voice* come into play.

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<sup>18</sup> Hjamil A. Martinez-Vazquez, *Latina/o Y Musulman: The Construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 67-68.

<sup>19</sup> Several authors have discussed this process. See Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) for an overview of major theories and a framework for understanding the process.

<sup>20</sup> Martinez-Vazquez, 80-91.



The LADO website offers several resources for the visitor, including relevant website links for Latina/o Muslims, general Islamic resources such as the Qur'an and other documents presenting Islamic basics, and several pictures of converts. The area of the site that contains the most content, however, is the section for the *Voice*. The *Voice* does not follow a rigid structure; after a section of quotes (often from *Hadith*—traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad—and sometimes one or two non-Muslim authors), there is usually a poem by a Latina/o Muslim, followed by eight to thirteen articles whose style and topics vary from issue to issue, though most deal with Latina/o Muslims in some way (and about one-sixth of which are written in Spanish). Since many articles are composed by the readers themselves, who are for the most part not professional writers, less formal styles of writing are employed which allows the readers to relate to the articles more. The articles also often contain various personal elements. A story about a recent Latina/o Muslim event, for instance, may contain personal experiences and the writer's reflections on aspects of her religion. The most common type of article (about one quarter of all the articles) deals with these current events concerning Latina/o Muslims. There is roughly an even distribution of articles (each representing about one-sixth of all articles published) that are primarily stories about personal experiences dealing with everyday issues one faces as a Latina/o Muslim, current events concerning all Muslims, reflections on the writer's or the community's religious life, and historical studies.<sup>21</sup> Of this latter category, most (nineteen out of fifty-

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<sup>21</sup> I must stress that there is not a strict distinction between each group listed here. I have counted some articles in multiple categories in cases when there is a strong presence of two or more of the categories. The point of this list is to not to present a scientific analysis (which would be difficult, given the fluidity of the styles of articles), but rather to give a picture of the general trends.

two<sup>22</sup>) deal with general Islamic history that is not specific to one particular cultural or ethnic group; fifteen concern issues related to Muslim Spain; nine look historically at the general modern phenomenon of Latina/o Muslims; five deal with Latina/o Muslims in Latin America; and three present histories concerning all Muslims in the U.S. There are a little over a dozen articles each for 1) those containing instructions on proper Islamic practices, and 2) those containing calls to action (usually urging *da'wah* efforts among Latina/o Muslims).

It is interesting to note that despite the vast majority of U.S. Latina/o Muslims being converts,<sup>23</sup> there are relatively few conversion narratives in the *Voice* (eleven total). This was partially the result of the founders' intentions to give space to all topics concerning Latina/o Muslims, but it also reflects the place the contributors are at concerning their religious identity formation. The fact that there are more articles that deal with the history of Muslims in Spain than conversion narratives should be understood in relation to my earlier observation that few of the conversion narratives have any mention of an Al Andalusian identity. The *Voice*, therefore, serves as a site that fosters the development of this identity. What is important, here, is that it is an identity that is often not self-evident and many of the readers had not used it prior to reading the *Voice*.

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<sup>22</sup> These figures were compiled using articles from 2002 to the April-June 2009 issue.

<sup>23</sup> Galvan, "FAQs About...Revisited."

## **“Latina/o Muslim” as a Transcript and Imagined Community**

James C. Scott has offered the term “transcript” to indicate discourses that circulate among groups.<sup>24</sup> The *Voice* is developing a transcript concerning a “Latina/o Muslim” identity that includes images, practices, and ideas of a cultural memory of a unified “Latina/o” world as well as a Muslim Spanish heritage. The popularity of LADO, then, indicates that this transcript is not only circulating widely, but that many people (Latina/os and non-Latina/os) are incorporating this transcript into their personal identities and/or understandings of the world. This process is what Benedict Anderson describes as creating an “imagined community.” It is not “imagined” in the sense that there are *no* historical or cultural connections either between Latina/os in general or between Muslim Spain and today’s various Latina/os, but in that these connections have recently been put into relief and identified with through certain media.<sup>25</sup> This is also not to say that there are not strong social forces “pushing” for the existence of this transcript. In fact, as I discussed above, there are at least three factors at play that encourage the development of a “Latina/o Muslim” transcript, and LADO, given its democratic structure, may be more *reflective* of these forces than shaping them. What makes LADO unique, however, among both U.S. Latina/o Muslim groups and U.S. convert groups more generally, is the speed at which it became popular and its exceptionally broad-based self-identity. These are a factor of A) its being circulated

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<sup>24</sup> See his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1-15.

<sup>25</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2006).

primarily on the internet so that people anywhere in the world can access its transcript; B) the timing of its emergence, which happened to coincide with the rise of both relative widespread internet access and U.S. Latina/o Muslim conversions across the U.S. (it essentially “rode the waves” of these two phenomena); C) the fluidity of the identity of the “Latina/o;” and D) the continued connections of U.S. Latina/os to Latina/os throughout the rest of the world.

These last two points should be elaborated on briefly. First, because of the vast geographic spread of Spain and Portugal since the late fifteenth century, and approaches to and cultures of miscegenation that differed markedly from later northern European colonizers, today’s “Latina/o” identity is less limited by phenotypic characteristics and specific cultural practices than the two other large U.S. convert “ethnic” groups (white EuroAmericans and African Americans), and actually the “Latina/o” identity subsumes many elements of both of those groups, as it shares to an extent a Euro-Christian culture as well as containing a strong African element, particularly in the Caribbean. As a result, Latina/os are more able to cross ethnic group lines, an ability that is reflected in the fact that two-thirds of all U.S. intermarriages involve Latina/os.<sup>26</sup> It is not a surprise, then, that we often find Latina/o converts among Anglo-majority or African-American-majority convert circles, while the same ease of ethnic enclave travel is not as great for the other two groups. Furthermore—and this is my second point—many U.S. Latina/os maintain strong a connection with their countries of origin. The relative geographical propinquity of Latin

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<sup>26</sup> Gregory Rodriguez, *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), xv.

American nations as compared with most other countries that provide large numbers of immigrants to the U.S. has contributed to the ability to maintain these ties. These ties can serve as a conduit for Latina/o identity transcripts which thus reinforce a Latina/o identity and prevent simple assimilation and shedding of an immigrant's homeland identity—a feature for U.S. ethnic groups that is perhaps most extreme with Latina/os.

These above factors, then, have combined with the existence of an already relatively large<sup>27</sup> U.S. Latina/o community and Latina/os' marriages to various Muslim immigrants (which historically has occurred more often than immigrant Muslim intermarriage with African Americans<sup>28</sup>), and so have led to an ever-increasing number of both Latina/o Muslims and “Latina/os” in general—all of whom are potential “Latina/o Muslims.” “Latina/o Muslim,” as an identity transcript, is therefore a uniquely widely-accessible identity marker. And so, as more Americans have come to possess some sort of a Latina/o identity, this has contributed to the popularity of the “Latina/o Muslim” transcript that LADO circulates.

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<sup>27</sup> Population estimates vary, with some U.S. Muslims claiming up to 200,000, though I suspect this to be too high. See note 6.

<sup>28</sup> For example, for a discussion of early Arab Muslim immigrant avoidance of African Americans, especially as marriage partners, see Wasfi, 176-77. Also, consider anecdotal evidence reported in a Houston, Texas mosque that local Muslim immigrants rarely marry African Americans, there are a few known instances of intermarrying between whites and both immigrants and African-American Muslims, yet “Hispanics” there are said to be known to marry “Arabs, . . . Pakistanis, people from Taiwan, or Bangladesh, . . . which they [Muslim immigrants and Latina/os] never would have done in their own countries. . . . Here they are doing that more and more often.” Hoda Badr, “*Al-Noor Mosque: Strength Through Unity*,” in *Religion and The New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*, ed. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 212-13.

## Being a “Latina/o Muslim”

Because “Latina/o” is such a broadly-defined transcript in general, for LADO, just what makes a “Latina/o Muslim” is similarly broadly-defined. Contributors to the *Voice* come from many different backgrounds in terms of ethnic and nationality identity, employment type, family generation in the U.S., current residence, class, etc. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the majority of individuals who have written articles—particularly those who have submitted multiple articles—are likely relatively well-educated, perhaps college-educated, individuals, though available evidence cannot confirm or deny this.<sup>29</sup> And while this would correspond with findings in an early study of U.S. Latina/o Muslims,<sup>30</sup> there are certainly large numbers of non-college-educated Latina/o Muslims, including many in

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<sup>29</sup> Studies of Western, non-African-American converts have routinely “found” that these converts have high education levels, despite the fact that there has been a long history of converts with average educations marrying immigrant Muslims and converting. I believe this may be due to a number of factors, not the least of which is only analyzing converts based on published conversion narratives or written survey responses—both are activities that suggest a relative confidence in one’s ability to communicate using the written word, and therefore may reflect higher education. For examples of U.S. studies that have employed these methods and obtained these results, see Carol Anway, *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Lee’s Summit, MO: Yawna Publications, 1996) and Larry Poston, *Islamic Da’wah in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Meanwhile, I conducted a study of thirteen converts using face-to-face interviews and found these converts generally had education levels lower than the national average. See Patrick D. Bowen, “Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado,” *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 1/ 1 (2009): 46-47.

<sup>30</sup> Galvan, “FAQs About...Revisited.”

prison and ex-convicts.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, while we can distill a few culture and identity themes that run throughout the issues of the *Voice*, we must bear in mind that these are reflections of the contributors and not necessarily of U.S. Latina/o Muslims in general, nor of LADO itself. This section, then, should be seen as painting a *particular* picture (see, transcript) of the experience of Latina/o Muslims, one that should be compared with findings in future studies, but one which, because of its wide circulation, may also have influence over the identity/transcript-formations of readers of the *Voice* who may in turn circulate those transcripts to other people.<sup>32</sup>

Given the purpose of LADO and the *Voice*, it is not surprising that many of the writers discuss issues relating to dealing with perceived conflicts between their new religious tradition and their culture of upbringing. Some have felt that these conflicts are too great and took their Latina/o culture and, as one new Muslim writes, “flushed it down the toilet” because, he continues, “My culture isn’t the thing that’s/ going to save me from Jahannam [Hell].”<sup>33</sup> However, many others are finding ways to integrate their cultural heritage and religion in ways they feel do not “compromise” either. One strategy for this, as I discussed

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<sup>31</sup> For an interesting descriptive study, one not done from a sociological perspective, of Latino Muslim prisoners and ex-convicts, see Edward “SpearIt” Maldonado, “God Behind Bars: Race, Religion, & Revenge” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2006). The *Voice* even had an issue (April-June 2007) with several articles conveying the views of some Latina/o Muslim prisoners.

<sup>32</sup> Karen van Nieuwkerk has observed that online Muslim conversion narratives have over time become more standardized, suggesting that the narratives become transcript templates that newer converts use for understanding their conversions. See her “Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives” in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. K. van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 95-119.

<sup>33</sup> Abdullah Gonzalez, “Our Struggle, Sacrifice,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k3.html>.

earlier, is to highlight the cultural connection to a Spanish Muslim heritage. Words and phrases,<sup>34</sup> names (for instance, the surname Medina, and, as one writer noted, the similarity between the surnames “Garcia” and “Gharsiyya”),<sup>35</sup> foods,<sup>36</sup> customs, and even morals<sup>37</sup> are seen as tied to this tradition. Other Latina/o Muslims are able to integrate cultural traditions that they recognize as distinct from those being practiced by the local immigrant Muslims, an action they see as legitimized by a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>38</sup> For example, some Latina/o Muslims continue to play and enjoy music, from American folk music to the congas.<sup>39</sup> At the First Annual Chicago Latino Eid Festival, a piñata (which was in the shape of a seven-point star, a Mexican cultural reference) was brought for the children, and the served food included arroz con grandules, guacamole, meatloaf, chicken wings, biryani, and red chicken.<sup>40</sup> And while some Latina/o Muslims identify primarily with their particular

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<sup>34</sup> Juan Galvan, “The Islamic Influence on Spanish Phrases and Customs,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2009), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k9.html#4>.

<sup>35</sup> Francisco Rodriguez, “Truth Hidden by Christian Spaniards,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k2.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Rachel Laudan, “The Mexican Kitchen's Islamic Connection,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (July-September 2008), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k8.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Shinoa Matos, “First Annual Hispanic Muslim Day,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (July-September 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k3.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Ricardo Pena, “Chicago’s Annual Latino Eid Al-Adha Festival,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2005), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k5.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Khadija Rivera, “Letter to Muslim Hippie Chicks,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k2.html>; Juan Galvan, “Thoughts Among Latino Muslims,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k3.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Ricardo L. Pena, “First Annual Chicago Latino Eid Festival,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (October-December 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k3.html>.



national homeland (for instance, one Latino writes under the name “MusliRican”<sup>41</sup>), one mosque’s “Latino Muslim” cultural night event demonstrated the integration of not just Islam and “Latina/os,” but of distinct ethnic groups which came together as “Latina/o.” A writer remarked: “Our meetings [for preparing for the cultural night] usually got stuck around food—What cultural dishes would be most appropriate...” People asked, “We have to have rice and beans, but what style beans? Black or Pinto Beans?”, “Central American style, Caribbean style or Mexicano Style?”—and they eventually agreed on a combination.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, at a Dallas Mosque opening for Latina/o Muslims in 2003, flags from numerous Latin American countries decorated the Islamic center.<sup>43</sup> And of course, at Latina/o Muslim gatherings the speech of the attendees will usually be a mix of English, Spanish, and Arabic expressions.<sup>44</sup> The publication of these activities themselves, along with information about individual Latina/o Muslims performing important Islam-related activities (such as pilgrimages),<sup>45</sup> help spread the idea that “Latina/o” and “Islam” are not contradictory, as well

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<sup>41</sup> MusliRican, “Because Allah ta'ala made me both...,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2010), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k10.html#2>.

<sup>42</sup> Kathryn Espinoza, “Latino Muslim Cultural Night,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (October-December 2004), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k4.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Juan Galvan, “Dallas Mosque Open House in Photos,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (October-December 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k3.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Juan Galvan, “Comments: ISNA Latino Muslim Conference,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (July-September 2004), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k4.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Yahya Lopez, “Sacrifice at Rock Falls,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2004), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k4.html>; Rocio Martinez-Mendoza, “My Hadji Experience as a Latino Muslim,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2005), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k5.html>.

as the idea that people from throughout the Latina/o cultural world could indeed unify as “Latina/o.”

To be sure, a prominent theme resonating throughout the personal stories and religious reflections that fill the *Voice* is one of enduring an individual, often difficult struggle in one’s life as a Latina/o Muslim, as a triple-outsider: an outsider to the dominant U.S. culture, an outsider to one’s local Latina/o culture and/or family, and an outsider in one’s local Muslim community—or, “Lonely in the Masjid...”, as one author called it.<sup>46</sup> Besides facing discrimination from the dominant U.S. culture just for being Latina/o, it is common for Latina/o Muslims’ own families to not understand their conversions, and to, at first, question, sometimes constantly, the converts as to why they made their religious choice.<sup>47</sup> One Dominican Muslim remarks: “Every day, not only do we face numerous conflicts living in Western society, but we oftentimes also find ourselves having to defend our beliefs in our own households!”<sup>48</sup> But family responses to conversions are not always negative. There is often a mix between criticism, mere acceptance, and explicit support. Sometimes even whole families convert after one of its members does.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Shinoa Matos, “Lonely in the Masjid...,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k3.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Suha Siam, “One Woman Reclaims Her Roots,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k3.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Kenny Yusuf Rodriguez, “Islamic Influence in Spain,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k2.html>.

<sup>49</sup> C.K. Harpole, “Latino Open House in New Orleans,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2004), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k4.html>.

Some have observed that within a number of local mosque communities ethnic cliques develop and a few Muslims hold racist attitudes about others, including about Latinas.<sup>50</sup> At other times, isolation within a mosque is a result of few immigrant Muslims attempting, or simply able to help the new Latina/o Muslim learn the Islamic way of life.<sup>51</sup> And without other Latina/o Muslims around for support, they, as Juan Galvan has described, “find themselves very alone. ...breaking their fast alone, studying alone, praying alone, and culturally alone.”<sup>52</sup> This, as I have discussed, has motivated many to seek out other Latina/o Muslims. Though, generally, Latinas/os are not ignored by immigrant Muslims, many of whom have reached out to Latinas/os, providing support and *da'wah*, particularly after September 11, 2001.<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, conversion itself has also given Latina/o Muslims a sense of pride and confidence, important feelings especially in facing the difficulties of being a minority within a minority. When people mock and criticize one Latina for converting and wearing the *hijab*,<sup>54</sup> she feels strengthened by her faith:

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<sup>50</sup> Galvan, “Thoughts Among.”

<sup>51</sup> Khadija Rivera, “Dawah Beneath the Palm Tree,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k2.html>; Nurah Khaled, “We are Growing,” *The Latino Muslim Voice*, (July-September 2008), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k8.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Juan Galvan, “The Latino Muslim Jihad,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k2.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Saraji Umm Zaid, “Latinos, Islam, and New York City,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k2.html>.

<sup>54</sup> A hair- and neck-covering scarf.

I will never submit to your ways; to your beliefs; your word / [...] You can tell me that I am ugly because I humble myself... / You can tell me that my beliefs are wrong... / [...] [But] I am Islam. / I am Proud to love my Creator / I am proud to be Muslim.<sup>55</sup>

Another Muslimah writes:

When I feel sad and lost, I recite the verses promising victory to those who strive to uphold piety, that place of rest and peace that lies not so far ahead and the Source of all Peace Whose help is always near. So, I wipe away my tears and keep on trying, never giving up.<sup>56</sup>

With this pride and confidence, their faith is therefore often seen as giving them access to ways to overcome difficult or depressing situations. And, like most Muslims, Latina/o Muslims attribute improvements in circumstances in their lives to Allah. “I’ve noticed,” writes one Latina, that “since my reversion... circumstances in my life seem to be coming together in amazing harmony. In other words, Allah is answering my prayers, sometimes without me even asking!” She adds that “Allah has opened up a door for me to escape this barrio” and that Allah has helped her son pass his GED.<sup>57</sup> Another Muslim sister, and immigrant from El Salvador, shed tears as she gave a speech about how Islam changed her life: “This is a pure and clean religion. Allah gave me a second chance.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Linnet Caban, “My Deen,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k2.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Velma Cook, “What Prayer Means to Me,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2009), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k9.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Ghadah Ali Gutierrez, “Una Casa Bonita,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2003), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k3.html#5>.

<sup>58</sup> Mariam Abbasi, “Third Annual Hispanic Muslim Day,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (July-September 2005), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k5.html>.

In fact, Islam is typically seen as a pure, True religion; one that is connected to the way of nature and one's "true self"—all of which are accessible now through their conversions. In a poem, Samantha Sanchez writes:

I am a woman and like the earth / I am many layered / [...] My core is solid/  
And I have lived a lifetime / Of quakes, eruptions, war and peace / Yet ever  
comforting and protecting / Shielding, providing / Encompassing / And ever  
praising my Creator / I am earth<sup>59</sup>

For one male convert, the True-ness of Islam is the very source of strength that he uses in his daily life: "I feel so empty being away from you [Allah]. / To sit in your presence is to know Islam is true. / For I listen attentively at your side. / At work the next day my faith I dare not hide."<sup>60</sup> In another instance, a Muslimah had dropped out of school and lived a life full of drugs, alcohol, and partying; even her introduction to the Islam came while she was buying marijuana. But all this soon changed. She writes: "One day while reading the Quran, I began to cry and fell to my knees and thanked Allah for guiding me to the truth." She visited a mosque a few times and decided to formally convert. She abandoned her old way of life, earned her G.E.D., obtained a good job, and has even made the Hajj pilgrimage.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Samantha Sanchez, "Like the Earth," *The Latino Muslim Voice* (April-June 2002), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k2.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Isa Lima, "Empty," *The Latino Muslim Voice* (January-March 2008), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/jan-mar2k8.html#3>.

<sup>61</sup> Ali Melena, "My Conversion Story," *The Latino Muslim Voice* (October-December 2007), accessed August 20, 2010, <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k7.html#9>.

## Conclusion

Scott distinguishes between two types of “transcripts”: the public and the hidden. The first is generally circulated by a dominant group and reflects their interests, and the second is that which is used by a subordinate group. The hidden transcript is largely influenced by the public one, but also contains subtle expressions of resistance that deny elements in the public transcript and reinforce certain values, symbols, structures, and practices important to the subordinate group. Typically, these hidden transcripts remain *hidden* from the public gaze, but in some instances, given certain circumstances, these transcripts can erupt into the public scene.<sup>62</sup> This is what appears to have happened in the case of LADO, which is the product of not only individual U.S. Latina/o Muslims possessing a shared, if somewhat amorphous identity and experiences of isolation within U.S. Muslim communities, but also of the internet which is a medium that allows for hidden transcripts to be made public relatively easily. And through this, the transcript of “Latina/o Muslim” has gone even from beyond being merely a public transcript that may exist as an accepted discourse—it has become an “imagined community” that now has its own power to shape identities and practices.

The above examples were used to give a sense of the transcript circulated in LADO’s *The Latino Muslim Voice*. This transcript promotes, above all, a sense of a shared “Latina/o” culture, and, to a lesser extent, a shared Muslim-Spanish heritage. “Latina/o Muslim,” moreover, is not only an identity legitimated through historical connections and religious tradition, it is also seen as natural and true and is associated with such things as pride,

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<sup>62</sup> Scott, 4-42.

confidence, and the ability to overcome hardships (particularly those faced by Latina/os). These discourses can thus be appealing for individuals who relate to and/or desire any of these traits. Furthermore, because a large proportion of articles deal with current events in the Latina/o Muslim world, readers are exposed to examples and models of many people actually *living* as “Latina/o Muslims”; by focusing not on conversions but on life after conversion, the *Voice* provides practical models for day-to-day living, a useful tool for those who are learning how to live *as* “Latina/o Muslims”—not just Latina/os converting *to* Islam. The fact that so many disparate U.S. Latina/o Muslim events are now reported to LADO by attendees of those events attests to the pervasiveness of not only affiliation with LADO, but, more importantly, of an identification with the “Latina/o Muslim” transcript. After almost one hundred years of U.S. Latina/os converting to Islam, we are now witnessing the creation of an increasingly-unified “Latina/o Muslim” imagined community.