Career Trajectories and (In)Formalization among Muslim Performing Artists in the UK and the U.S.

Accommodationism or Fundamentalism?

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Abstract

In the present era of heated debates on free expressions involving religious sensibilities, Muslim artists form a sociologically interesting group. Comparing the UK and the U.S., based on specific case studies of Black convert Muslim artists, the author found that Sufi- and Salafi-oriented performers display different dynamics in their career developments characterized by the intent to find congruity between their artistic aspiration and Islamic belief. Drawing from process-oriented sociological perspectives, the phases of formalization, informalization, and intensified formalization are theorized as constituting trajectories by which Muslim performing artists grapple with the relationship between art and religion. They reflect varying ideological orientations and influences regarding the (dis)embedment of Islam in culture.

Keywords: field of Muslim artists, Islamic conversion, British Salafism, North American Sufism, race-ethnicity, process sociology

Introduction

The perspectives presently discussed on the career and life trajectories of Muslim performing artists are drawn from an ethnographic study of the transnational field of Muslim artists in the UK and the U.S. At the time of research, the artists were engaged in cultural production in Anglophone hip-hop and alternative music, spoken word and poetry, storytelling, theater and acting, stand-up comedy, film performance, and contemporary art on stage. My aim has been to study how Muslim performing artists integrate their artistic aspirations with their religious beliefs. While expecting much tension when combining art and

religion, a pattern of varying orientations has become apparent among the artists studied regarding their relationship, integrated or decoupled, between culture and Islam. In dealing with the perceived religio-artistic mores, certain orientations turn out to develop in a set of formalizing and informalizing phases, regarding the blending of religious and artistic aspects, through which Muslim artists pass. In these phases, religious and ethnic affirmation takes place. This article discusses the transformational causes of phases, the influence of authoritative voices, and the significance of the pattern found.

From an historical perspective, artists have generally become less dependent on a single source of legitimation by church or state since the Renaissance. This process of "autonomization," argues Bourdieu, diminished the importance of ethical criteria (morals) in the production of art, while aesthetic standards gained importance (2009: 112-14). As Gombrich shows, art has since become a matter of individual expression in a multiformity of styles, signifying personal emancipation (Oosterbaan: 22, 209). In Europe and North America, art is still typically perceived as a matter of individual freedom and creativity.

In contrast, practicing believers of the traditional monotheistic religions often pursue a single source of legitimacy, which for Muslims is the oneness of God *(tawhid)* that demands both behavioral and mental restraints, taming passions and emotions. Among others, the daily lives of many Muslims are shaped by Islamic etiquette *(adab)* about manners and morals as codes of behavior and by the example of customs of the Prophet Muhammad *(sunnah)*, leading to guidance or obligatory practices. This way, Muslims collectively draw distinctions between practices that are considered Islamically allowed (*halal*), encouraged (*mustahabb*), undecided (*mubah*), or prohibited (*haram*), e.g., concerning performing (popular) art. This presumed contrast between art and religion may lead to tension among Muslim artists.

British musician Cat Stevens (aka Yusuf Islam) is the quintessential performing artist who went through several phases of negotiating his artistic aspirations with his religious belief after conversion to Islam – making us aware of a certain sequence. Born Steven Demetre Georgiou to Greek and Swedish parents of mixed faiths, he embraced Islam in 1977, and over the following decades changed his stage name from Cat Stevens to Yusuf Islam and eventually to just Yusuf, reflecting changes in his career and religious trajectory. His Islamic conversion followed an ongoing spiritual quest that was heightened after Stevens survived a severe accident and subsequently read the Quran. Playing exclusively with voice and drum from then on,[1] Yusuf Islam focused on *nasheeds*, the genre of Islamic gospels without stringed instruments. At the time, the singer abruptly retreated from the mainstream music business because he believed that its temptations would go against the teachings of Islam (Stroumboulopoulos). Twenty years later, however, Yusuf felt that his earlier decoupling of art and religiosity expressed by his departure from playing guitar and singing in English may have been born of misinformation. Eventually, he came to understand that Islam is "not cut and dry" regarding its judgment on music and art (Nolen). He started to reconsider the spiritual usefulness of music in contemporary troubled times, and began to gradually integrate English-

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[1] The drum, or *daff*, is non-contested in Islamic discourse because the Prophet Muhammad approved of this musical instrument.

language lyrics into his Islamic songs. In 2006, Yusuf returned to the production of pop music accompanied by guitar with his album, *An Other Cup*.

The friction between contrasting conceptions of art and religion underlies the different phases in the career and life trajectory of Yusuf Islam. As a believer, he has sought to synthesize his artistic inspiration with his Islamic faith. In this complex task, the case of Yusuf broadly depicts a phase of formalization and a subsequent phase of informalization. Still Muslim at the latter stage, he allows himself more artistic freedom than before, reflecting his changed view on the integration of art and religiosity.

Contemplating whether the career of Yusuf Islam exemplifies the typical trajectory of contemporary Muslim performing artists, the question emerges: How do British and North American Muslim artists generally negotiate possible tension between the worldly values of popular art and the sacred values of religion? To expose patterns of how artists perceive the relation between art and Islam, I have analyzed the artistic trajectories of Muslim performers with Anglophone productions based on data from interviews, secondary sources, and cultural events related to seventy Muslim artists in the UK and the U.S. Converts to Islam and born-again Muslims[2] either integrate or separate Islam and culture in their identity as Muslim artists. This article will analyze seven case studies of performing artists whose narratives are emblematic of two kinds of trajectories that emerged among the artists. I have chosen to focus on representatives with African American and Black British backgrounds because they share social and cultural historically significant narratives more than other Muslim artists, whilst at the same time several of them construct, rather explicitly and from contrasting viewpoints, public discourses on the transformation of relations among art, culture, and religion.

Context: The Art and Islam Discourse

Like discussions in Christianity about whether art can serve to praise God, fulfill didactic purposes, and motivate ethical action, or, on the contrary, stirs immodest behavior and idolatry, as summarized by Brown, there are ongoing discourses on the (im)permissibility of (popular) art in Islam. Disputes about dance are found in the *Hadith* during the lives of Prophet Muhammad and his Companions (Abd-Allah), about musical instruments among theologians in the time after the Prophet (Shiloah), and about hip-hop music, female voices, and stage behavior in current times. One illustration of the latter is the debate on "Music – Singing or Sinning?" which I attended with several hundred Muslims in the East London Mosque in 2009.[3] In this strict reformist-oriented center affiliated with the Bengali Jamaat-e-Islami movement, the dispute over the justification of controlling or even erasing cultural habits versus loosening cultural restrictions became heated.

Among various Arab societies, Sunni views on the (im)permissibility of music and entertainment in Islam can roughly be categorized into hardline, liberal, and moderate stances among authoritative voices, according to Otterbeck, all which shape debates globally since

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[2] Born-again Muslims are those Muslims who, after revaluing the principles of Islam, change their ways of expressing religiosity and practicing faith – often with increased conviction.

[3] The event was financially supported by the Leicester Taybah Centre, a mosque with a Salafi understanding to Islam.

many Muslims perceive the Middle East to be the center of Islamic knowledge. The hardline view holds that music is *haram* and should be largely forbidden because it destroys public morality, while the liberal stance is near to the rejection of censorship concerning art. Condemning the perceived excesses of sexually exciting rhythms and dance, scholars and teachers of the moderate view, such as prominent theologian Al-Qaradawi, judge the cultural production of popular art permissible when it sprouts from a *halal* intention, is performed in proper circumstances, and is morally beneficial to society at large.

Among Islamic teachers in the UK and the U.S., I encountered both the hardline and the moderate stance in the art and Islam discourse. The first stance is more often part of Salafi orientations, forbidding wind and string instruments and public female singing for mixed audiences. The second stance may reflect orthodox Sufi orientations, which allow or moderately encourage popular art of Muslims.

Considering national differences, the puritanically-oriented Salafism in Islam has a relatively tiny presence in the U.S., according to Aidi (214), while Salafi expressions are important on the British mainland, where they are promoted with Saudi funds (Hamid 2009: 56). In the UK, which has a long tradition of Islam channels, the high Muslim concentration[4] has met severe religious intolerance.[5] In the U.S., where confessing to a religion is a dominant cultural custom, the mystical Islamic tradition of Sufism has become thriving, according to McCloud (2003). Hamid convincingly argues that, popularized by charismatic American scholar and convert Muslim Hamza Yusuf Hanson, the representatives of the more activist and scholarly (orthodox) form of Sufism are eager to counter the success of literalist (British) Salafi trends (2009; 2016: 68-87).

As we will see, artists who embrace Islam negotiate the art and Islam controversy differently, which results in varied career and life trajectories among Muslim performers in the UK and the U.S.

Theoretical Framework: Secular Trends and Trends in Cultural Behavior

In the relational social theory of Bourdieu, artists are part of the field of cultural production in which participants compete to gain cultural capital, e.g., artistic skills, which may lead them to symbolic capital, such as recognition and authority in art (1996; 2009: 7). Following Bourdieu, Rey explains how the religious field is an arena of competition as well, in which agents struggle over the legitimate forms of capital particular to the religious field, e.g. moral sanction. In both fields, heterodox ideas compete with orthodox ones (Bourdieu 1996: 205). In the present study, Muslim performing artists are to different degrees associated with the field of Islam and its controversies regarding forms of capital, which includes legitimate authority over the issue whether and how Islam tolerates popular art and music.

Academic literature on Muslims in the popular arts occasionally highlights the influence of Islamic teachers on artists to express an Islam that reflects or reforms the perceived authentic national Muslim identity. Abdul-Khabeer, for example, asserts that hip-hop is embedded in "the larger project of developing an authentic American Muslim culture" (2007:

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[4] In 2010, Muslim concentration in the U.S. was 1%, and 4% in the UK (Pew Research Center 2012a).

[5] Social hostility toward Muslims has grown especially in the UK since 2009 (Pew Research Center 2012b).

125), through which American Muslims negotiate between culture and American Muslim identity. She notes that African American imam Talib Abdur-Rashid promotes the genre of "Islamic hip-hop" due to its cultural relevance for at least the Black American community in the U.S., and therefore for Islam. However, the significance and distribution of orientations is not yet specified regarding the transnational field of British and North American Muslim artists. In the next sections, I will discuss secular and behavioral trends influencing cultural views and attitudes, which may help to explain the individual choices of these Muslim performing artists in the art and Islam issue.

Secular Trends: Accommodationism and Fundamentalism

In the broad debate on the revival of religion, discourse focusing on culture and Islam provide an interpretive framework for analyzing the religio-artistic patterns among British and American Muslims. Although the secular process of the autonomization in art is also relevant, this paper focuses primarily on the accommodationism versus fundamentalism thesis, particularly raised by Roy (2010).

Accommodationism emphasizes adapting religious beliefs to the surrounding cultural environment and vice versa, such that the norms, traditions, and characteristics of one's society significantly shape how and when religion is expressed through art, music, language, literature, and urban life. Fundamentalism, as it is discussed in this paper, implies basically stripping religious expressions of particularly cultural (local, national, ethnic) properties so that it takes on a trans-cultural uniformity. Lapidus refers to fundamentalism in Islam as revivalist movements promoting personal piety or the reform of Islamic belief and practice to counter the influence of European and American materialistic consumerism and popular culture (823). Esposito explains Islamic fundamentalism among social groups in different ways of cultural austerity. These views, which specifically promote the Islamic scripture, behavioral principles and values of the early period in Islam, range between the understanding of Islam as a closed cultural system sufficiently articulated in the past and the understanding that socially conditioned Islamic practices and institutions should be changed to meet contemporary conditions (315-16). Positioned in the middle, which approaches the Salafi stance, is the conviction that Muslims should return to their revealed sources to revitalize the Islamic community and find the answers for Islamic society of today.

While from a sociological point of view, religion is mainly expressed through culture, Roy distinguishes between these two overlapping notions when raising the issue that religious beliefs are no longer embedded in contemporary culture (2010).[6] Positing two reasons, he claims that religious expressions have become disconnected from the broader culture – including (popular) art. First, aligning with globalization and the digital circulation of knowledge, the major religions have become standardized, freeing themselves from the cultural particularities to become understood in any context. Second, because piety, in a process of secularization, became increasingly relegated to the private sphere of believers, the reformulation of religion has triggered fundamentalist forms in their search for religious purity.

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[6] Roy defines culture as the productions of symbolic systems and institutions specific to a society and as the symbolic productions socially valued as an aesthetic category, i.e. *art* (2010: 26). Culture also includes the ethnic, local, and national understanding of culture.

Roy complains that the fundamentalist religious approach of faith communities, increasingly perceive culture not just as *worldly* (secular), but as "pagan" and impure (2010: 109-46). Thus, he professes, the normative *halal/haram* code has led to social exclusion because, whilst the accommodationist believer could still share a common culture and values with non-believers, the fundamentalist cannot (2010: 7). This ignorance particularly emerges, in Roy's view, when religious orientations are no longer anchored in and inspired by the philosophy and literature of divergent cultures. This attitude may occur in situations of uprootedness among Muslim believers in the context of globalization, blurring their sense of belonging (2004: 156, 171-72; 2010).

In contrast, synthesizing the perceived wedge between textual Islam and local practice, Bowen observes that Muslims have generally adapted Islamic traditions to local values, ideas, and conditions in the places and societies in which they live. Their individual efforts grapple with Islamic resources to shape practices in meaningful ways. He claims that Muslims draw on their religion to make sense of their cultural traditions, thus changing social realities. Contrary to Roy, he predominantly identifies Islamic accommodationism (adapting beliefs to culture and reversed) above fundamentalism among Muslims, especially at the local level.

Hermansen found that American Muslim teachers display comparable competing views on managing secular and sacred realms. Their debates on the relation of Islam with ethnic cultures and its culturally inspired customs proceed from the continuing discourse of classical Islamic jurists on good cultural practices versus heretical innovations. Among them, Hermansen distinguishes between those teachers who advocate a rejectionist attitude toward cultures and those who tend to assimilate religion in cultures,[7] which resembles the accommodationism versus fundamentalism contraposition. In between these views, she regards those who situate Islam as more valuable above cultures and the worldly and those who strive for the more equal relationship of Islam and cultures.

Redefining Islamic norms and values, e.g., by discerning between religion and culture, is inherent to the adaption of Muslim immigrants to non-Muslim majority contexts. In Western Europe, which in contrast to the U.S. has recruited many uneducated laborers for their growing industries, youth often identify their parents' religiosity as ruled by ethnic traditions. The perception of a "cultural Islam" or "village Islam" is noted by multiple academics, such as Roy (2004: 165, 268) and Mandaville. The British popularization of Salafism is explained by Hamid to dispose Islam of perceived cultural misrepresentations, which derives from an interpretative understanding that customs and traditions in the Prophet's time were devoid from historical and cultural accretions (2009: 390, 2016). The field of immigration and religion studies takes note of the dissociation between Islam and ethnic culture in faith-related discourse among second-generation immigrants in Europe. Van Tilborgh analyses that negative Muslim-related experiences are made consonant by purifying Islam through discursively decoupling religion from culture (2009). Similarly, Jacobson notes how universal relevance is allocated to Islam and inequality and suppression to culture by applying the religion versus ethnic culture distinction (143-47). These observations put the accommodationism versus fundamentalism thesis into perspective.

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[7] Hermansen uses the terms "cultural rejectionists" and "cultural assimilationists."

Behavioral Trends: In/Re/Formalizion, Symbolic Battle, and Syncretism

To interpret the trajectories of Muslim performing artists dealing with changing artistic and Islamic manners, it is relevant to look at cultural behavior in social hierarchies. Civilization in Northern Europe developed among human beings from external social restraints on behavior to an internal, psychological, regulation of cultural codes, according to the process-sociological study of Elias on manners, which relates social structure to personality structure.[8] When a growing social interdependency caused particular habits to be regarded as distasteful in society, social control led to the multiplication of bodily constraints, e.g., with regard to manners of eating and sexual behavior. Status anxiety and the desire for upward mobility compel people to imitate the cultural codes of social superiors (Elias: 414-21; Wouters: 43-44). Status anxiety may occur more often in the U.S. due to the lack of clear class barriers, as discussed by Wouters (149), and within segments of Black communities due to status insecurity, as claimed by Smith and O'Connell (19). Elias' conceptualization of the notion of "formalization" can be conceived as a social phase towards more strict regimes of manners and emotions, leading to self-control.

Behavioral informalization – a term coined by Wouters – began to dominate the formalizing attitude correspondingly with social rise, material prosperity, and emancipation of former outsiders, i.e., women and working class members in the twentieth century. A degree of permissiveness toward social behavior became accepted, which meant that certain manners were no longer taboo. The reduction of status differences between social groups, argues Wouters, required a refined management of flexible conduct. Informalization can thus be understood as a social phase of controlled relaxation of behavioral regimes. Related to times of any altering of the dominant social configuration due to broader (social, economic, and political) changes, Wouters distinguishes short-term waves of reformalization in cultural behavior, which may indicate a temporary return to greater formality such that people show renewed respect for discipline and authority (167-96).

Looking more specifically to phases related to cultural conduct of Muslims in power-structured situations, convert Muslims must cope with a different reality when adopting a new religion and its cultural mores and habits. Wohlrab-Sahr claims these believers tend to distance themselves from the culture of their previous social context to adapt the still unfamiliar worldview of Islam by enacting a syncretic, accepting attitude or by symbolically waging a battle towards their previous situation. Syncretism involves gradually combining old and new religious and cultural aspects of past and present selves and contexts. In contrast, argues Wohlrab-Sahr, convert Muslims who engage in symbolic battle undertake a radical break from their former, non-Muslim, selves and contexts. Related to Bourdieu's concept of classifying distinction and the internalization of appropriate behavior and tastes (2004: 466-84), new Muslims must redefine what they perceive as worldly and sacred, and which manners are allowed, encouraged, or prohibited.

Behavioral choices are related to the cultural repertoires of people to develop coping strategies. Experiences of White supremacy and racial segregation, as well as the memory and lingering effects of slavery, provide some commonality to the experiences and concerns of

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[8] Elias calls these developments "sociogenesis" and "psychogenesis."

Black artists of the African Diaspora. In previous decades, as raised by McCloud, Black converts often sought out a "color-blind" Islam that transcends ethnicity and culture (2003). Aidi claims that in the spiritual search for a non-racist Islam that led convert Muslims to the Middle East, dissatisfaction with current Islamic movements and the quest for belonging has also redirected converts to explore "the oldest Muslim presence in the West," i.e. the American Islam of Malcolm X and the powerful civil rights movement (xvi).

This quest realigns with the U.S.-led discourse on Black, African American, and immigrant relations, which problematizes the legitimacy of judgment on Islamic conduct from those representing "immigrant Islam" (McCloud 2006: 123-25; 2003). Immigrant Islam manifests the habit of "universalizing the particular," asserts Jackson (12). McCloud contends that the authority of African American imams is not recognized such as the authority of those from the Muslim world. Zebiri argues that new Muslims experience a "double marginality" – which is even more so for Black Muslims – by having to cope with prejudices from the broader society as well as from born-Muslims claiming authentic piety. In the UK, Moosavi found that convert Muslims regularly adapt their behavior expressed in naming and dressing to gain the blessings of born-Muslims, who keep doubting the authentic Islamic identity of new Muslims. The research presented here demonstrates that these complex social dynamics and multileveled discourse influence the choices and careers of convert Muslim performing artists profoundly.

Research Methodology

The findings presented in this article are based on an ethnographic study of the field of Muslim performing artists in the UK and the U.S. between 2009 and 2012.[9] They are discussed from the concept of intersectionality through focusing, among others, on the significance of ethnic and religious background. Besides drawing on secondary literature from academic sources as well as traditional and digital media, semi-structured in-depth interviews[10] on art, culture, and Islam were conducted with sixty-five Muslim performing artists and eight stakeholders, including managers, teachers, and scholars in the UK and the U.S. In addition, twenty-three similar participants in art were studied from short interviews or secondary sources. The eventual focus group consists of seventy artists.[11] Moreover, I attended seventy religio-artistic events to collect ethnographic data on the orientations of Muslim artists.

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[9] This study, "Singing or Sinning: Cultural Orientations among British and American Muslim Performing Artists," is partly funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO and has taken place at Radboud University Nijmegen (Religious Studies) and University of Amsterdam (Sociology).

[10] For meeting respondents, I used the method of on- and offline snowball sampling.

[11] Information of the artists discussed derives from (a) in-depth interviews; (b) short interviews; (c) content analysis of secondary sources; and (d) content analysis of biographical performances and Q&A sessions. Sukina Abdul Noor, Muneera Rashida, Tyson Amir, Aja Black, Michael Mumisa, Yassir Chadly: predominantly (a). Mustafa Davis: (a) (c) and (d). Ashley Chin, Zaid Shakir: (b) (c) and (d). Mutah Beale: (c) and (d). Yusuf Islam: (c).

Interview transcripts, content, and ethnographic field notes were systematically analyzed predominantly using MaxQDA software.[12]

The artists in the broader study include born Muslims and convert Muslims, who have chosen the religion of Islam later in life. The first are predominantly born in South Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim, immigrant families; the latter range from indigenous Muslims including African Americans and (White) Natives to immigrants from the Caribbean and African countries, e.g. Jamaica and Mozambique.

Empirical Findings: Phases in Personal Trajectories

Based on the research explained above, I argue that the career trajectories of British and North American convert Muslims in the contemporary performing arts can best be interpreted considering the theoretical framework, the schema of in/re/formalizing phases, on the development of cultural codes. The data indicate that the artists negotiate the potential dilemma between art and Islam in varied ways. By studying the religious and social significance of these career trajectories, this article aims to map the divergent orientations toward art, culture, and Islam and reflect on them with the secular trends of fundamentalism versus accommodationism.[13]

As for many convert Muslims, the transition to Islam for converts in the performing arts marks a phase of adapting to new behavioral norms and relinquishing, or at least controlling, old habits. After this phase of formalization are two possible trajectories, i.e. towards the informalization or just the intensified formalization of cultural habits.

The Phase of Formalization

Conversion starts with taking the *shahada*, the Islamic creed of belief in the oneness of Allah and acceptance that Muhammad is his Messenger. Besides repenting from any contra-Islamic behaviors or beliefs from before conversion, this early phase involves incorporating the manners *(adab)* of the new faith. As noted by Moosavi and Zebiri, Islam, like other religions, requires convert Muslims to commit themselves to different understandings of former values, such as gender roles, and adapt their bodily and linguistic expressions. McCloud (1995) notes that for women, the quranic call for modesty – as opposed to drawing attention – may compel them to grapple with what modesty means for them, considering their own cultural identities and contexts.

When British Jamaicans Sukina Abdul Noor and Muneera Rashida of female hip-hop band Poetic Pilgrimage embraced Islam, they covered their hair with hijabs and stopped "doing music" (interview, December 6, 2010).[14] Prior to conversion, they had an unrestrained

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[12] Using MaxQDA software for mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods, the interviews are deconstructed along sensitizing sociological concepts and self-developed categories.

[13] I would like to gratefully acknowledge Egbert Harmsen and especially Christine S. Sheikh for their most valuable comments and suggestions in an earlier stage of the paper as well as the peer-reviewers and editor of the *Journal of Religion & Society* in a later phase.

[14] Insights are also drawn from participant observation at (semi-)public (religio-artistic) events, such as "The Walls" at the Tricycle Theatre, London, November 8, 2009; "Islam from Africa with Love" at Community Center

lifestyle of going out, drinking alcohol, and regarding music as "the most important thing." After conversion, the rap artists felt they needed to re-assess the place of music in the hierarchy of values in their lives.

> . . . we had to learn about our intentions, especially in the art form of hip hop, where it can be very elitist, very arrogant – there can be a lot of negative traits involved in hip hop. I think that we too were quite arrogant . . . in what we did (interview, December 6, 2010).

Their attempt to erase their "arrogant," independent "hip-hop attitude" locates them in the mode of symbolic battle, as they both strove for a break with the past. Having to redirect their intentions turned out to be a mental and almost physical effort – Sukina felt unable to write new rap lyrics. When, after a few months, one rhyme emerged, called "In the Name of Allah," Sukina realized that only Allah could give rap artists talent, as much as He could take that talent away from them. Since then, Poetic Pilgrimage continued its music, but started every album with the Arabic phrase *bismillahi al r-rahmani al r-rahim*, "in the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate." Thus, after an artistic break as a period of reflection, they eventually adopted a syncretic approach to being Muslim artists.

While their newly developed religious *habitus* accepted certain restrictions regarding style of dress, paying respect to Islam in Arabic phrases, often performing in spoken word instead of rap music, and carefully treating topics on love, Muneera and Sukina continued to hold, in contrast to their male Salafi-oriented colleagues, that art and music are important for Islam – as it is unnatural to say: "Flowers are *haram*," so is it unnatural to say that "Music is *haram*" (interview, December 6, 2010). While the newly chosen religion initially led to a degree of formalization, that is, restraint of mental and physical behavior in their personal lives that influences their practice of art, the syncretic conviction that art is important to Islam facilitated transition to the succeeding phase of informalization.

From the Phase of Formalization to Informalization

For one-third of the Muslim performing artists whose religio-artistic trajectories are focus of my broader study, the initial phase of formalization is followed by a phase of informalization or a phase that at least has aspects of informalization.[15] This succession signifies the transition to a controlled relaxation of manners and styles. The artists can transition from formalization once they encounter religio-artistic legitimation through social (external) and personal (internal) sanction. This phasal development is facilitated by two kinds of legitimation – religious legitimation and ethnic cultural legitimation, which are not mutually exclusive.

Informalization by Religious Legitimation. Movement into the phase of informalization by the Muslim performing artist can be catalyzed through encountering positive moral sanction for her or his artistic practices by significant Islamic teachers. When African American rap artist

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Frensham Street SE15, London, November 6, 2010; and "This is Youth Factor, Investing in the Brighter Future" at Conway Hall, London, November 20, 2010.

[15] Career trajectories of the remaining artists have the following characteristics: a. the artists may still be amid the formalizing process; b. their trajectories do not reveal obvious change, for instance, because of broken-off careers; or c. their trajectories display different sequences.

Tyson Amir embraced Islam, he did not quit his musical production. Nevertheless, while in the phase of incorporating Islamic habits, Tyson was concerned about the possibility he might do something Islamically wrong. In the debate on art and Islam, he sensed that Muslims did not perceive any problem with poetry, but when introducing the issue of music "red flags came up" and bans were issued: "You can't do that!" (interview, February 15, 2010). Out of the desire to be a proper Muslim, Tyson was moving towards judging hip-hop music as at least somewhat distasteful or doubtful. This doubt held him back as an artist in lieu of pursuing his artistic goals with full commitment.

During some years after his conversion, several *Sufi*-inclined teachers in the Northern California Bay area gave Tyson their approval. They called his lyrics, which had shifted from a socio-political to an intercultural style, "very important and necessary, especially for the youth in America, and for the world in general" (interview, February 15, 2010). The warmly respected Moroccan American imam and musician Yassir Chadly supported Tyson by singing on his first album *Mecca and Medina.* Once rap artist Tyson had a sound understanding that he was *not* compromising his faith by performing rap music, and that his songs may even be socially and morally uplifting, the art and Islam controversy became far less problematic for him. In his interview, he said:

> I focus on what I can do, which is my art, and my music; and becoming a better performer, becoming a better artist; becoming a better person. And that's it. . . I have absolutely no interest in that debate. But when I was younger, I was influenced by it, because I really didn't know. And then, I got a little bit older and became more informed, and spoke with more people who were better informed than me, people with knowledge that our community really respects, who sat down and told me specifically, detail by detail, that the work I was doing was perfectly fine (February 15, 2010).

Mentally, Tyson Amir gained artistic freedom, not only by achieving spiritual (Islamic and academic religious) education himself, but also by the moral permission of respected teachers in California who he perceived to be bearers of sound Islamic knowledge. This phase of informalization grows from the previously formalizing phase in that it focuses on producing socially useful art that is legitimated from a moderate stance to art and Islam. Tyson likely heard imam Chadly's explanation that "music that only speaks from the belly button down is prohibited by Islam, *haram*" (interview with Chadly, February 27, 2010). After rapping about Islam and Muslim-related issues, Tyson's focus has shifted to more universal issues that have meaning to all people. From the syncretic view that regards music as an important element of the American habitus by providing entertainment as well as a message, Tyson emphasized expressing his musical style for "social unity" after feeling supported by those authoritative voices (interview, February 15, 2010).

In the years after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks in New York and London, ironically, the artists in the present research experienced a kind of Muslim upward mobility in that both Islamic and non-Islamic organizations invited them to perform their artistic expressions. Many artists had received university educations and specific community-based learnings, which gave them the opportunity to incorporate the history of Black civil rights and the role of music in that movement. From this cultural capital, a critical voice emerged in their art against both anti-

Islam prejudices as well as taboos within the Muslim community. These standpoints attracted the interest of several Islamic teachers in the UK and the U.S. Their scholarly legitimation transitioned the artists into the informalization phase by supporting their efforts to reconcile their art, music, and ethno-racial cultures with Islam against the voices of external social control that advised them to tone down, or even abandon, their performance.[16]

Compared to Tyson Amir, the female hip-hop band Poetic Pilgrimage entered the field of Muslim artists much more recently. Sukina Abdul Noor and Muneera Rashida did not need to resolve long-held doubt about the permissibility of their kind of art, because they received positive sanction from specific authoritative voices in the field of Islam early in their careers as Muslim artists due to some unusual circumstances. Their case illustrates how informalization came to prevail over certain embodied formalization.[17] When the media, influenced by the presumption that Muslim women were monolithically voiceless and oppressed, drew more attention to Islamic believers after 2001, the imperative in secular as well as Islamic discourse to highlight Muslim women's voices compelled Poetic Pilgrimage to speak up. Dressed in long garments and brightly colored headscarves, the British Jamaican artists performed at Muslim events where no woman had ever performed before and artistically conveyed a combination of pious and feminist thoughts.

British South African scholar Michael Mumisa, who had translated the "Fatwa on Music" by the Grand Mufti of the prestigious Al-Azhar in Egypt from Arabic to English, taught the women of Poetic Pilgrimage that "everything in Islam is permissible, until its prohibition is proven" (interview, December 10, 2010). If they would stay away from lewd things ("immoral and sinful acts"), they could continue their artistic productions in public. Significantly, when the Muslim-born organizers of London's "Global Peace and Unity" in 2008, a huge event contracting many singers of legitimate *nasheeds* from the Muslim world, refused to allow the female singers on their stage, prestigious African American imam and Islamic teacher Zaid Shakir, who himself does not listen to music at home, stood up for the artists. After his introduction – "Poetic Pilgrimage has told me to give you a message" – he recited the lyrics the Black women had planned to perform for several thousand Muslim audience members (Poetic Pilgrimage, interview, December 6, 2010).

At the same time, Poetic Pilgrimage displayed with specific art productions a critical attitude toward rules of conduct among representatives of conservative views on Islam that exclude women. While a sense of symbolic battle was embedded in Sukina Abdul Noor and Muneera Rashida's narratives in that they used to be "anti-everything" as adolescents, their battle as Muslim artists who had moved into a phase of informalization was directed against aspects of the new (i.e., Islam) instead of a radical break with the past (i.e., their art). Inspired by specific religious legitimation, as African and Caribbean women, or as they call it, "people of sound, melody, harmony, and vibration" (interview, December 6, 2010), they could create a syncretic reconciliation between certain codes of their ethnic culture and their new faith.

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[16] The YouTube video *Happy British Muslims*, in which Muneera Rashida is singing and dancing, has triggered a storm among British Muslims (*Economist*).

[17] This observation is based on fieldwork between 2009 and 2012, which means that the phases the artists were in during that time may have transitioned to other phases since then.

Informalization by Ethnic Cultural Legitimation. Some cases in the field of Muslim performing artists demonstrate the emotional struggle of passing from formalization to informalization. They reflect the difficult revaluing process that is applied to the role of ethnic and national (e.g., Jamaican, African, American, and British) culture in the artist's trajectory. For some artists, this transition from a formalization characterized by severe symbolic battle into informalization characterized by syncretism requires a conscious re-appreciation of their ethnic and national identities.

Aja Black, singer of hip-hop duo The Reminders, has a mainly secular, ethnically varied Jamaican, French Creole, and African American background. Black felt attracted to Islam because it provided her with a clear framework in life. After conversion, she did her utmost to incorporate Arabic language and Islamic habits in her daily life. The ambition to fit in with those Muslims who knew Islam from birth and cultural-historic (South Asian and Middle Eastern) lineage – a model of socio-religious status to many new converts – compelled Aja Black to "repress herself a little bit." She covered her dreadlocks and dressed more discreetly than before, especially when knowing she was "going to be around Muslims" (interview, April 9, 2010).[18]

External social control to behave in the right civilized way was exercised by acquaintances of Aja Black when informing her about the impermissibility of "rocking with nail polish and tattoos" and warning her that she could end up in hell if she did not give up public singing (interview, April 10, 2010). In addition to external pressures, her desire to do whatever was needed to be a right Muslim reflected internalized social control to leave her big earrings at home and wear the hijab on stage.

However, Aja Black ultimately experienced this regime of self-control as a form of symbolic violence. Black, who described in her interview being raised by a non-Muslim mother who drove a motorcycle, felt deprived of a sense of self. By effacing her own identity, the social and inner pressures had driven Black to deny her Jamaican cultural heritage and its taste for freedom, which she defined as the freedom "to loosen your hair and just be happy with yourself" and not feeling guilty. Suffering from self-doubt and depression, she almost started to crack emotionally (interview, April 9, 2010). It was not until several years later that Black became more comfortable with combining her public performance in hip-hop with her religious beliefs. Having internalized certain restrained Islamic manners and tastes, she felt more secure as an experienced Muslim woman who could finally afford to informalize as a Muslim artist.

Familiarizing herself with the ideas of respected, Sufi-disposed, American scholar Umar Abd-Allah was an important factor in her transition between phases. In *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*, Abd-Allah argues that Islam has been able to become a global civilization due to its ability to make itself "culturally relevant to distinct peoples, at diverse places and in different times" by cultural understanding. With his conviction that Islamic practice may receive positive content from what already exists in ethnic, local, or national cultures, as Hermansen

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[18] Insights in the trajectory of Aja Black are also drawn from participant observation at "Youth Culture in the Muslim World," a (semi-)public pre-meeting with *The Reminders* at Trinity College, Hartford, in preparation for the Trinity International Hip-Hop Festival.

notes, Abd-Allah takes a position in the art and Islam discourse that gives forth a positive and near to equal relationship between the notions of Islam and culture.

Reflecting on Abd-Allah's writing, Aja Black's doubts on behavior that she viewed as expressions of her ethnic heritage were particularly challenged by the question whether "Allah would want her to deny the character and throw away the culture that He had allocated her" (interview, April 9, 2010). She developed the understanding that each person is gifted with a personal path to God – whether with or without singing or wearing hijab. She no longer rejected the cultural habitus that she had incorporated while growing up and has become less afraid to permit herself to wear eye-catching bijous while singing.

Besides permissiveness and certain individualization in a changing "we–I balance," the measurement of transformations (Wouters: 191-96), the informalization phase includes the attitude of inclusiveness. Against the will of those Muslims who expected her to perform for the Muslim community exclusively, Black decided to sing for all social groups. When commissioned to sing in front of a Muslim audience, Black uses self-defined, flexible behavioral management:

> If somebody is offended by my voice – I am sorry. But there is part of my behavior that I can actively control. If they've contracted me to perform at a Muslim event and there's going to be scholars there, I don't want to give the music a bad reputation by my gestures and body moves, because it's about music – it's not about me. . . And it doesn't mean that I tone down my performance. It just means I give more energy to different aspects of my performance. I'll speak more about the meanings of the songs; . . . I try to let people feel the song is partly theirs (interview, April 9, 2010).

Aja Black seems to have accepted that certain body movements could be offensive for a Muslim audience and that she should not publicly express self-contentment as a mainstream popular artist, but this restraint has its limits. Black does not accept the belief that her female singing voice and moderate beautification is sinful in the public domain. Expressing syncretism, she has learned that Islamic restraint can be combined with artistic freedoms.

Another case to illustrate the transition between the phases of formalization and informalization by reconsidering ethnic national culture is the one of American film director Mustafa Davis, who studied English and photojournalism. Growing up as Brian Davis in an artistic, biracial environment – his African American father and grandfather were musicians and his White (German) American mother practiced painting and ceramics – Mustafa Davis began looking for new religious guidance in his late adolescence when, in retrospect, he had become "wrapped up with himself," lived in a broken home, and embraced a street culture (interview, February 18, 2010; see also Davis 2011a). His experience of the remarkable trustworthiness of Muslim strangers led him to accept that orthodox Sunni Islam was the right kind of universal religion for him.

After Mustafa Davis took the *shahada*, he changed his looks from "pseudo hip-hop hippie skater" who was sporting dreadlocks in the California Bay Area to a kind of traditional Arab outfit that includes a long gown as if in imitation of the Salaf, the early followers of Prophet Muhammad. Not yet having the filter to determine which practices are Islamically correct and

which simply reflect ethnic or national cultures, it is often the case that new Muslims may perceive this style of dress as Islamically authentic, just like they may regard bearded immigrant Muslims from Muslim-majority countries as authoritative (Davis 2011c). However, in retrospect of the desire to improve their Islamic status, as well as the fear of being socially rejected by other Muslims, several American Muslim artists felt they had initially been picking up cultural habits that were not part of the religion from South Asian and Arab immigrant Muslims who had presented themselves as knowledgeable (Tyson Amir, interview, February 15, 2010).

In his new identity of Mustafa Shaheed, Davis travelled through Morocco, Syria, Abu Dhabi, and Yemen to study Islamic jurisprudence and Arabic over the course of ten years (interview, February 18, 2010).[19] With this radical break with his past, Davis tried to transform himself according to the cultural assumptions of how to be a devout Muslim – he left his love for music from the North American culture he had grown up in completely behind. Restrained from listening to radio and CD's, and not being able to musically identify himself with recognizable music, Davis eventually felt "a deep void" – like Aja Black (interview, February 18, 2010). External and internal pressures had led him to perceive these restraints as civilized behavior in Islam:

> I thought that it meant . . . I had to become something other than what I was. And I wasn't equipped with enough knowledge at that time to know that I didn't need to commit "cultural apostasy" in order to do that. And some of that was taught to me (Davis 2011c).

After having tried to replace his own culture with the Arab culture in dress and music, it would become gradually clear to Davis that the Arab taste could not replace his quintessential Californian American cultural habitus and preferences. Very selectively, he began listening to music again (Davis 2010), realizing that hip-hop has developed from slave hymns and the protest art of the Civil Rights Movement. Through years of training, Davis had gathered knowledge on Islamic jurisprudence and learned how to judge matters that are Islamically undefined, such as the production and reception of art and music, which made him feel more relaxed and self-assured as Muslim. When he returned to the U.S., Mustafa Davis became inspired by Umar Abd-Allah's ideas, which may have further legitimated his movement into informalization and given him the needed confidence and rationale to share his narrative of phased conversion publicly.

In the phase of controlled permissiveness, or informalization, Davis started using the name Mustafa Davis, a contraction of Brian Davis (his American identity) and Mustafa Shaheed (his Muslim identity). Now, integrating music into his film productions, it is not the "Britney Spears kind of style," but music that he composes himself (interview, February 18,

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[19] Insights in the trajectory of Mustafa Davis are also drawn from participant observation at (semi-)public (religio-artistic) meetings, such as *Deen Tight* at The Drum, Birmingham, October 13, 2009; *Deen Tight* at Stoney Brook University, March 25, 2010; "Creativity and the Spiritual Path: Why is Creativity Relevant?" at San Francisco, February 21, 2010; and "Contemporary Muslim Voices in the Arts & Literatures" at Harvard University, April 17, 2010.

2010). At his Q&A performances for his documentary film *Deen Tight*, sometimes Davis wears a gown, but he might also wear jeans.

Although Mustafa Davis' formalization was characterized by a more severe Salafi-disposed view that forbids music completely, both he and Aja Black eventually incorporated a flexible Islam that accommodates the art and music of different cultures to allow people to grow as cultured beings and contribute to a diversified Islamic civilization. By choosing to revalue their own ethnic and national identities, partly inspired by Umar Abd-Allah's *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*, Aja Black and Mustafa Davis have achieved, what could be called, ethnic cultural legitimation as Muslim performing artists.

The phase of informalization illustrates how Muslim artists and authoritative persons connect Islamic cultural traditions to broader conversations about the common good and the challenges faced by diverse Muslim communities (see Hirschkind). As the convert performing artists gained confidence in their own legitimacy as Muslims, they could critique the traditional status claims of some born-Muslims, who initially seemed to embody the truth about their faith. The examples express how Muslim artists evolve toward a disposition of resistance and emancipation. Their mode of symbolic battle transformed into a syncretic attitude by integrating previous authentic cultural values into the new religion alongside drawing legitimation from scholars who can problematize the binary of East-West in Muslim relations, i.e., confronting the challenges of Black (indigenous)-immigrant relations among Muslims, particularly in the U.S.

From the Phase of Formalization to Intensified Formalization

Although, during the informalization phase, many Muslim performing artists strived for a more individual relationship about art as well as God, some performers decided that to get closer to Allah they had to dissociate themselves from art and music completely. Rather than transition from formalization to informalization, this subset of approximately ten percent of the artists in the broader study shifted from formalization to intensified formalization by limiting art and abandoning the use of musical instruments. British artists Masikah Feesibilah, aka Masikah al Asadi, Spitz Renwick, aka Yaqub Abdusalaam, and Ashley Chin, aka Muslim Belal, and North American rap artist Mutah Wassin Shabazz Beale, aka Mutah Napoleon Beale, all undertook this religio-artistic trajectory (see Van Tilborgh 2016).

Many artists in the present study, those who took this path, grew up in the subculture of hip-hop including break dance, graffiti, and rap music that went along with references to both heterodox and orthodox interpretations of Islam (see also Abdul-Khabeer 2007, 2012). It is not uncommon among Black rap artists to become Muslim in an environment where hip-hop is connected to gangster culture as well as to Islamic expressions from North American musicians. This hip-hop tradition is related to the heterodox Nation of Islam (NOI*)*, its late popular spokesman Malcolm X, who before his assassination became a Sunni Muslim, and the ultra-unorthodox sect Five Percent Nation, which broke away from the NOI in 1964. In the U.S., as Mohaiemen and Jackson interestingly discuss, these institutions are considered the passing-through point for Black Muslims on their way to Sunni Islam, the largest denomination.

Except for Mutah Beale, the more or less Salafi-disposed artists from the broader study were all based in Birmingham and London (see Van Tilborgh 2016), where one can attend many Salafi-oriented lectures by teachers and preachers with anti-musical instrument opinions, such as UK-based African American Khalid Yasin (see also Mandaville). Unlike several convert Muslim performing artists who transitioned from formalization to informalization in their artistic and religious trajectories, Mutah Napoleon Beale and Muslim Belal do not have the cultural capital of higher education. In public biographies, lyrics, and interviews, both Belal and Beale refer to the impoverished circumstances of their youth and the chasing after bling bling (material goods) in the hood. They have the kind of cultural capital gained through their rough experiences with the excesses of street life, in rap groups, and derived from family members. Displaying significant symbolic battle regarding their former selfs and situations, these rap artists have chosen a two-fold kind of conversion to Islam by entering, after formalization, the phase of re-formalization, or more accurately, intensified formalization, by stressing the impermissibility of music. Each has shared some critical socio-psychological experiences that have shaped their religious orientations.[20]

North American Mutah Beale, better known as Napoleon, of Puerto Rican and African American descent, exemplifies how socio-psychological experiences can influence Muslim performers' evaluation of the relation between art and Islam. At the age of three, Mutah witnessed the shooting death of his Muslim parents, followers of the Nation of Islam (Beale 2014). His Christian grandmother raised him until she passed away. Subsequently, Mutah Beale discovered that his music brought him appreciation, as well as symbolic and economic capital in the ambiance of dealers and drugs. As Napoleon, he joined the group Outlaw Immortalz, at the time led by famous, ultimately assassinated, rap artist Tupac Shakur, who is best known for his highly successful commercial gangsta rap. Mutah Napoleon describes this environment as violent, as well as corrupted by the vices surrounding the music industry.

In 2002, Mutah Napoleon's religious and lifestyle transformation began after he injured his brother while fighting under the influence of alcohol (Beale 2014). A friendly Muslim brother persuaded him to go to the *masjid* to learn Islam. From there, the process of formalization started. Napoleon became Muslim – from both the born-again and convert Muslim disposition (Beale 2011). He began reading the Quran, learned some of the rituals and Arabic terminology, and went to Mecca for *hajj*.

> It was easy to accept Islam once I knew it was from The One who created me. What was hard was trying to walk away from the life I was used to living, because it was such an extreme way of life. To all of a sudden find out the way that I was living my life was wrong and know that I had to change it, of course it took some trouble. . . As an individual you make one step and there might be another test (Beale, quoted in Tusing).

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[20] Insights in their trajectories are drawn from participant observation at (semi-)public (religio-artistic) events, such as "Spittin' Light, Healing the Hood: Muslim Voices for Urban Renewal" at Owen Harris Lecture Theatre, Buckinghamshire New University, April 26, 2009; "Stand-up comedy at The Brickhouse," The Brickhouse, East London, November 15, 2010; "Eid Celebration" at University of Sussex, December 12, 2010; *4e Nationale Bekeerlingendag* (4th National Converts Day) at Opera Zalencentrum, The Hague, January 8, 2011; and from the documentary film *Deen Tight*.

British convert Ashley Chin, aka Muslim Belal, of Jamaican descent, grew up in a single parent household on a deprived South London council estate. Although he could culturally benefit from his father who worked in music production, Ashley significantly spent his youth as member of a notorious South London gang. With no grade but a high one for Drama, he left school at the age of fifteen, "expecting nothing from life" (Chin 2012). Nevertheless, while developing his rap skills, the social milieu of the ghetto upbringing, brought him financial benefits as much as cultural rewards – Ashley's lyrics were regarded as a way of speaking the truth. In addition to starting a music studio, he entered the British urban film scene and "made it out" of his situation, often in roles that reflected his rough street experiences (Hasnet). Raised Christian, Ashley Chin's conversion to Islam started after reading *The Truth of the Life of this World* by Harun Yahya, which warned him he would be seriously judged on Judgment Day (Chin 2011b). Having taken the name of Muslim Belal, he explained his first conversion to Islam as a process of working to impress God with purposeful acts of piety to benefit humanity, instead of working for material gain in the present world, the *dunya* (interview, December 12, 2010).

Intensified Formalization by Religious Legitimation. Comparable to the artists who entered the informalizing phase, the rap artists who made a contrasting turn to intensified formalization found internal and external justification.

Muslim Belal, while learning the manners and language of the new faith, initially continued rapping to music. However, like his Salafi colleagues, after examining with experienced Muslim brothers the stances regarding art and Islam among Islamic teachers from the classical past related to the four Sunni schools within Islamic jurisprudence (Hanifi, Maliki, Shafii, Hanbali), and counting their anti-music views, he decided to abstain totally from musical instruments. Belal also realized he could not combine his current position in the hip-hop industry and pay daily attention to the *Deen*, his faith (Chin 2011a). He ushered in a new phase, the phase of intensified formalization, when he adopted the Salafi-disposed opposition to musical instruments. In an a cappella rap rhythm, Muslim Belal tells his life story in numerous series of stage performances titled "From the Streets 2 Islam": "I came from the street to Islam out of the ghetto. I was blind – I will never turn back. Allah took my life out of the darkness. I don't need the money no more. I'm enough with my Deen. Read the books, it's the truth . . . And tell my mother when I die: 'Don't cry.' I believe in a life that goes on beyond the sky" (Eid Celebration at University of Sussex, December 12, 2010). Although it was painful to sacrifice the symbolic rewards of his hip-hop career, his new popular shows bring the former rap artist a different kind of respect. As discussed by Van Tilborgh (2016), following the "from darkness to light" narrative of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, aka Malcolm X, who had a twofold conversion from Christianity to the Nation of Islam and then to Sunni Islam, Muslim Belal has become a "Muslim revealer" with views on how to get to Paradise. Called Ashley Belal Chin now, he irregularly resides in Kuwait due to his trans-cultural work for the TIES Center, whose mission is to help "Western Muslims" strengthen their knowledge of Islam.

Mutah Napoleon Beale followed a trajectory comparable to Muslim Belal. Initially, he endeavored to make "clean hip-hop albums" without vulgarity, but came to believe that the music industry hardly supports the genre of conscious music (Tusing). For the first years after his conversion, Mutah Beale found himself going back and forth between being a believer amid the holy atmosphere of the *masjid*, and being a rap artist in the profane clubs surrounded

by women and alcohol. Several years after the start of his process of formalization, he decided to take the ultimate strict view, siding with those who think music is *haram*. Because "Islam is pure," one cannot attribute it to impure music, Mutah Beale justifies, which makes defending Islamic hip-hop identical to defending Islamic alcohol to him (Beale 2008). After leaving the music industry, Mutah Beale has become an internationally invited Muslim motivational speaker, warning youth about the deceptions of fame: "The Sunna is Islam and Islam is the Sunna. Live the life of a Muslim correctly according to the Sahabah [companions of the Prophet]! Allah chose them as role models – not the rappers with their bling bling and drugs" (Converts Day, The Hague, January 8, 2011). Like Muslim Belal, as argued by Van Tilborgh (2016), the "from darkness to light" path of influential Malcolm X is a symbolic legitimation for the choices in his career and religious trajectory. Dressed in Islamic gear and in an atmosphere of recorded *nasheeds*, Mutah Wassin Shabazz Beale explains his struggles and choices in life regarding art and Islam to (prospective) convert and born-again Muslims. Besides performing as Muslim revealer, he has become a trans-cultural entrepreneur, expanding his brand in Islamic-oriented retail based in Saudi Arabia. Due to the extensive media exposure of their purified lifestyles, both artists have been able to gather and benefit from religious capital.

Discussion

In their artistic careers and life courses, Muslim performing artists may pass through various phases in their search for a balance between artistic aspiration and religious belief, expressed in different ways of naming, dressing, using language, and approaching art. Identifying how British and North American artists grapple with culture and religion, this article explains their choices in conduct from the scholarly perspectives that address different relations to what is considered worldly.

Research on American and British Islam in the twenty-first century, studying discourse on the relation between art, culture, and Islam in the transnational field of Muslim artists, contributes to the process and relational sociology of Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. From the concept of intersectionality through focusing on the significance of race-ethnicity as well as on individual biographies and by considering the role of authoritative religious voices, the views on art are analyzed, resulting in three discussion points.

First, this research highlights African American and Black British artists as a social group with shared symbols that reflect religio-artistic controversy in the interrelationship among art, culture, and Islam. Although both follow the phase of behavioral formalization in becoming Muslim, Sufi-disposed convert Muslim artists who move into the phase of informalization choose or even promote the position of accommodationism, in which Islam is dynamically and (almost) equally embedded in ethnic, local, or national culture(s). They share the idea that art and music – shaping culture – are central to the human being.

In contrast, the predominantly British Salafi-disposed artists who move into the phase of intensified formalization reflect the position of fundamentalism by preferring a more static Islam, whose essence transcends the meaning of culture. From their opposition to the tendency among some Muslims to adapt Islamic practice to suit their current cultural contexts, these artists convey that Islam and culture, whether national or ethnic, can only exist

harmoniously when personal behavior is restrained from dubious cultural styles – as in their interpretation of behavior in the days of the Prophet and the Salaf.

While the accommodationism/fundamentalism thesis suggests that the fundamentalist position to dissociate Islam from culture is internationally dominant, the situation is reversed in the field of British and American Muslim performing artists. Besides, for the Salafi-influenced artists, even when they frame non-Islamic culture as pagan, their spoken-word performances also aim to improve British society, which may be characterized by knife-crime and teenage pregnancy. This aim reflects continued partial embeddedness in their specific national culture.

Second, concerning the processual dimension of people's behavior, the segmented conversions of the artists can be read as different survival or coping strategies to emancipate themselves as former outsiders and increase their cultural and symbolic capital. Muslims who adhere to the decoupling of culture and Islam tend to identify negative cultural experiences with the concept of culture itself to make space for a purified Islam that offers them safety. For artists with the fundamentalist perspective, the phase of intensified formalization involves removing oneself from the perceived excesses of culture, leading to emancipation from a socially and culturally destabilized or deprived environment. In their need for Islam to safeguard them, these artists do not aim to synthesize the old with the new; they experience religious capital of being perceived as spiritually purer and more authoritative by nature of their strictness.

In contrast, the informalization trajectory favored by accommodationist artists keeps them in touch with an activist, artistic Black culture and cultural heritage that values cultural resistance. This informalization synthesizes the old with the new and emancipates their Islam from the authoritative voices of born-Muslims.

Third, concerning global trends, accommodationist artists in this research are not just North American Muslims. By revaluing their ethnic and national culture(s) in the informalizing phase, many accommodationist artists seek belonging by identifying with the origins of Islam among African Americans in the U.S. or – as several Sufi-oriented Black British artists do – in West Africa.

From horizontal relationships in which accommodationist artists receive religious and ethnic cultural legitimation, the process to regain personal authenticity is reinforced by several (often Black) Islamic teachers and scholars. They seek justification for the indigenous or (West) African perspectives to Islam, as well as a possible upgrading of undervalued authority in the local, British and American Islamic contexts. I suggest that this trend can be understood as part of the British and particularly American countermovement of authoritative orthodox Sufi voices against the advancing success of (British) Salafism as well as, more broadly, against the dominant voices claiming Islam. In this sense, ideological transnational trends related to authority in Islam have influenced the British and American career and life trajectories of Muslim performing artists.

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