

2017-01-01

# Alá es primero: Faith and Culture on the Mexican-American Border

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ALÁ ES PRIMERO: FAITH AND CULTURE ON THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN  
BORDER

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2017

ALÁ ES PRIMERO: FAITH AND CULTURE ON THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN  
BORDER

BY

ALAN EFRÉN VENTURA PÉREZ

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

Department of History

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2017

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## **ALLAH ES PRIMERO: FAITH AND CULTURE ON THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN BORDER**

On February 23, 2013, Ricardo García stood next to Brother Ali Al-Najjar in the Al-Mahdi Islamic Education Center located in El Paso, Texas. Ricardo, of a Mexican-American family, was prepared to make one of the most important decisions of his life: to become a Muslim. As the ceremony progressed, García explained the key moment in his life that persuaded him to be at the Al-Mahdi Center that day. The divorce of his parents, he mentioned, was the first path that encouraged him to follow the teachings of Mohamed. When his parents divorced, García had the difficult decision of choosing his which of his parent's creed to follow; in the end, he chose his dad, a recent Muslim convert.<sup>1</sup> When Ricardo finished his story, Brother Ali Al-Najjar told him to repeat the Muslim creed in order to finish the ceremony:<sup>2</sup> *La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad dun rasúlu Allah* (There is no god but God, and Mohamed is the messenger of God). As he finished pronouncing this sentence, he became a Shia Muslim.<sup>3</sup>

The Shia and Sunni Muslim communities of El Paso have experienced a cultural exchange with Mexican Americans since the 1980s. Since both of these communities shared the same social spaces, the social interaction between them has introduced many Mexican Americans to Islam. Marriage, friendships, and social experiences have united these communities, leading to the exchange of language, food, clothing, customs, and culture. The Latinos who chose Islam as their new religion embraced cultural values from the Muslim community, resulting in a cultural hybridity between these two communities and the creation of a new cultural language.

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<sup>1</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> I. A. Ibrahim, *Una Breve Guía Ilustrada para entender el Islam* (North Carolina: IIPH, Raleigh, 2004), 64.

In this thesis, I explore the cultural language that the Shia and Sunni Latino Muslims from El Paso created when they chose to convert from their previous religious beliefs to Islam. This new cultural language, a collection of cultural practices (religion, traditions, beliefs, food, language,) that when put together form a society's culture, was created when Latino Muslims began to negotiate their Latino culture and identity with their Islamic beliefs until, as scholar Michel de Certeau suggests, they formed a coherent cultural language that harmonized both identities.<sup>4</sup> During this process of negotiation, some Latino Muslims blend their ethnic cultural practices with Islam. By celebrating their Mexican traditional customs and harmonizing them with Islam, eating Mexican food with Islam's dietary rules and learning Arabic in order to feel more connected to God, Latino Muslims create a new cultural language. On the other hand, Latino Muslims who do not practice Mexican customs but maintain their Latinidad as the core of their identity, tend to reimagine and redefine their Latinidad within the religious framework of Islam until a new cultural language is formed. This language tends to lead some Latino Muslims to appropriate the Moor's mythical past, because for some Latino Muslims, the Moors represent the embodiment of what it means to be Latino and Muslim.

By analyzing the hybrid Muslim-Latino cultural discourse, by examining the way they negotiate their Mexican cultural practices and identity with Islam's religious beliefs, I seek to demonstrate how this new cultural language harmonized their Mexican culture and self with their new faith. I found this cultural discourse important because while academia has largely ignored Latino Muslims,<sup>5</sup> recent scholars like Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez and Patrick B. Bowen, both of whom have studied the religious experiences of Latino Muslims, their political institutions,

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<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *La toma de la palabra y otros escritos políticos* (México, D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1995), 59-60

<sup>5</sup> María Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto, and John Tofik Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 255.

and the construction of Latina/o identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States, have analyzed this new cultural language superficially. Additionally, I believe that my analysis of cultural language will lead other scholars to understand the way Latinos Muslims manifest their new identities. Lastly, even though Latino Muslims are composed of different Latino communities (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.), my study focuses on the cultural discourse of the Latino Mexican community from El Paso because each one of these cultural communities requires to be individually studied in order to have a better understanding of the cultural fusion between Islam and the Latin American communities.

I will use discourse as it is defined in sociology in order to explore the cultural practices of Latino Muslims. In sociology, discourse is defined as any practice that helps individuals to give meaning to reality. Thus, a discourse is any social practice that can be thoroughly analyzed by experts. Dances, rituals, music, myths, and cuisine are some examples that scholars can use as objects of research.<sup>6</sup> The cultural practices this essay analyzes are divided in three categories: customs, food, and language.

Because the Latino Muslim community has been largely unexplored by academics, and because in the United States many assume, or incorrectly describe, the religious experiences of Latinos as strictly Catholic,<sup>7</sup> this thesis seeks to bring to demonstrate the saliency of the experiences of Latino Muslims. As Juan Galván, the executive director of the Latino American Da'wa Organization (LADO) writes, ““Most information on Latino Muslims comes from Latino Muslim organizations instead of academia, which has essentially ignored them.””<sup>8</sup> LADO was

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<sup>6</sup> Ruiz Ruiz, Jorge. Sociological Discourse Analysis: Methods and Logic. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, [S.l.], v. 10, n. 2, may 2009. ISSN 1438-5627. Available at: <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1298/2777>>. Date accessed: 02 nov. 2017. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-10.2.1298>.

<sup>7</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 255.

<sup>8</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 255.

created in 1997 to promote and strengthen Islam among Latinos living in the United States, LADO uses social media to initiate discourses on Latino Muslims by revealing their existence and experiences in America, and by doing so, create a space for them in the imaginary community of the American state.<sup>9</sup> In other attempts, magazine articles have tried to uncover the salient social experiences of Latino Muslims, but as Hjamila A. Martínez Vázquez asserts, within these articles “there was no in-depth analysis on conversions or the way they reorganize their lives after.”<sup>10</sup>

During the last few decades there has been a steady increase in Latinos who have embraced Islam and its teachings. The total population of Latino Muslims in the United States is estimated to be from twenty-five to ninety thousand individuals.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, the higher US Latino Muslims populations are situated in the most populous cities, such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Some of these Latinos have grown up in Muslim families, families who have chosen to abandon the Latino-traditional Catholic beliefs in favor of Islam. However, the majority of converts are Latina/os who are college-educated and between 20 and 30 years old. Unsurprisingly, because the Sunni community is larger than the Shia, most of the converts are Sunni.<sup>12</sup>

There are multiple reasons Latinos have found the teachings of Islam attractive, which has led to an increase of Latino Muslim converts in the United States. In his article on the Puerto Rican community in New York, Khalil Al-Puerto Rikani posits that there are five possible factors that have encouraged Latinos to become Muslims: the social interaction between Latinos and African-American Muslims, the internet, Latinos living in immigrant Muslim

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<sup>9</sup> “Latino American Dawah Organization,” LADO, accessed October 1, 2017, <http://www.latinodawah.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 255.

<sup>11</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 304.

<sup>12</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 256.

neighborhoods, prisons, and marriage.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, conversion to Islam is more complex than it appears to be since the individual will experience a “transformation of religious, social, and cultural aspects of daily life.”<sup>14</sup> The neophyte would have to change their diet, clothing, prayer style, and embrace new practices such as fasting.<sup>15</sup>

### **A New Faith Ascends**

Islam is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion that originated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. According to the faith, its founder, Prophet Muhammad, was chosen by God to be the last of his messengers to spread His word. Naturally, because of its Abrahamic roots, it is closely connected to Judaism and Christianity with their prophets and myths.<sup>16</sup> The Qu’ran is the holy book of the Muslims. It is composed of several sacred texts that God divinely revealed to Muhammad when he was forty years old. Far from divorcing itself from Christianity and Judaism, the Qu’ran incorporates the teachings of Christian prophets, including Adam, Abraham, Moses, Noah, and Jesus. Therefore, in the eyes of the Muslims, the Jewish and Christian sacred texts were also inspired by the words of God. However, the Quran, uttered by God word for word, surpasses them because Muslims consider it as the final sacred text that God bequeathed to humanity.<sup>17</sup>

The historical split between the Sunnis and Shias occurred after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. Although the Sunnis and Shias share many similar religious principles, such as believing that only the Qu’ran and Mohamed’s example should be the source of religious

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<sup>13</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 257.

<sup>14</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 258.

<sup>15</sup> Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 258.

<sup>16</sup> Abbas Barzegar, “The Emerging Latino Muslim Community in America,” The Pluralist Project Harvard University, Last accessed November 27, 2016, <http://pluralism.org/research-report/the-emerging-latino-muslim-community-in-america/>

<sup>17</sup> Laurence Michalak and Karen Trocki, "Alcohol and Islam: an overview." *Contemporary Drug Problems* 33, no. 4 (2006): 523-562. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed November 2, 2017): 527.

inspiration for Muslims,<sup>18</sup> the sects were divided when the vacuum of power after the Prophet's death caused an intense armed struggle for the right to choose the next religious leader of the Muslim community. The Shia claimed that Ali, Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, was the only authorized successor to the caliphate, and therefore must be the next religious-political leader of the Muslims. However, during his rule, Ali was assassinated by his political opponents. Hassan and Hussein, his sons and future successors of the caliphate, were also killed in attempts to end their "illegitimate" rule. It is believed that Hassan was poisoned in 680 A.D. by his political adversaries, while Hussein was killed during a battle against the Umayyads in 681 A.D. To the Shia Muslims, these murders qualified Hassan and Hussein as religious martyrs.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the global Muslim's population is approximately 1.2 billion of which the majority belongs to the Sunni faith.<sup>20</sup> The Sunni are estimated to represent between 85% and 90% of the total population of Muslims in the world, whereas the Shia, the Muslim minority, which is mostly concentrated in Iran, represents only 10%.<sup>21</sup> In El Paso, Texas, according to Amir Mohammad Rastegari, a Shia Muslim who has been a member of the Al-Mahdi center for nine years, the Shia community of El Paso is estimated to have approximately 250-500 members, of which only 75-100 members are active members who attend the Al-Mahdi Center every Friday night.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, El Paso Sunni community is composed by approximately 2,000 to 3,000

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<sup>18</sup> Tanya Gulevich, *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions: An Introduction to the Religious Practices, Celebrations, Festivals, Observances, Beliefs, Folklore, Customs, and Calendar System of the World's Muslim Communities, Including an Overview of Islamic History and Geography* (Detroit, Mich. : Omnigraphics, 2005), 47.

<sup>19</sup> BBC News, "Sunnis and Shia: Islam's ancient schism," Last accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709>

<sup>20</sup> Abbas Barzegar, "The Emerging Latino Muslim Community in America," The Pluralist Project Harvard University, Last accessed November 27, 2016, <http://pluralism.org/research-report/the-emerging-latino-muslim-community-in-america/>

<sup>21</sup> BBC News, "Sunnis and Shia: Islam's ancient schism," Last accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709>

<sup>22</sup> Amir Rastegari, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November, 11, 2016.

members of which 300 attend Friday's prayers. Although the Imam of the Sunni Islamic center estimated this number, it is hard to say if he also included the Shia community in his estimation (an inclusion that would inflate the number of members of the Sunni community).<sup>23</sup> The main differences between the two sects are in how they practice the religious rituals of their faith. Similar to the Catholics, the Shia hold a special love for their saints. It is very common for Shias to visit the graves of sacred men to commemorate them. However, unlike the Sunni, the Shia value and obey, for the most part without question, the opinions and decrees of their religious leaders.<sup>24</sup>

### **Islam in the Americas**

The presence of Islam on the American continent is as old as the Spanish colonization of the New World. During the sixteenth century, Spanish conquistadores brought with them slaves to serve them as they explored and colonized the vast lands of the Americas. One of those slaves was a Spanish-speaking North African Muslim named Estevanico (ca. 1500–39). In 1528, Estevanico accompanied Spanish conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez in a disastrous expedition that would ultimately lead to the Spanish exploration of Florida, Texas, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa. Unfortunately, in 1539 Estevanico met his celestial creator when he was captured and killed by Native Americans in the arid lands of New Mexico. However, the impact of Islam on the American continent did not solely rest on the Muslim slaves, voyagers, and immigrants, but also in the influence of Islam in the Spanish culture. For example, after the Reconquista, the period when the Spanish kingdoms expelled the Arabs from the Iberian Peninsula, certain Muslim cultural elements persisted in the Spanish culture in the form of architecture, music, cuisine, and

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Gray, "Being Muslim in El Paso," El Paso Inc, Last accessed November 1, 2016, [http://www.elpasoinc.com/lifestyle/local\\_features/article\\_3e13c26a-ed2a-11e5-b894-dfa5624a5977.html](http://www.elpasoinc.com/lifestyle/local_features/article_3e13c26a-ed2a-11e5-b894-dfa5624a5977.html)

<sup>24</sup> Tanya Gulevich, *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions*, 48.

language. Naturally, as the Spaniards conquered and extended their power to the New World, those Islamic features were transmitted to their colonies in the Americas.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the 500-year history of Latino Muslims in the American continent is for the most part silenced or unknown. There is little research about the Latino Muslim communities in America. Therefore, it is very difficult to understand to what extent Muslim identities lingered in their communities before probably being lost to the sociocultural changes that their new home countries experienced when the new Latin American states began to form their new nations.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the history of Latino Muslims, especially those in the United States, lacks a solid historical event or movement that can be used as a base to study the formation of the Latino Muslim community. For this reason, in order to understand contemporary Latino Muslims, Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez states “one cannot look into a single factor but rather consider this growth as the result of multiples conditions and situations over the course of time” (addressed in page number 4).<sup>27</sup>

### **Muslims in El Paso, Texas**

According to Stewart Lawrence, there were three main waves of immigration: the first period began in the late nineteenth century and ended on the eve of World War II. The second period was from World War II to 1961. And the final one dates from 1965 to the present. In the first wave, Muslim immigrants prioritized the preservation of cultural values more than constructing religious spaces for their communities. In the second wave of immigration, a myriad of students and urban entrepreneurs sought to settle in the United States. As a result, the concentration of many pious Muslims in one area could have encouraged religious consciousness

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<sup>25</sup> Edward E Curtis, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History* (New York : Facts on File, 2010), 333-334.

<sup>26</sup> Curtis, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History*, 334.

<sup>27</sup> Hjamil A Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o y Musulmán : The Construction of Latina/o Identity Among Latina/o Muslims in the United States* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 15.

among them which promoted the proliferation of mosques. In the third wave a large influx of women and children pushed the construction of religious spaces even more. The presence of many women and children in the United States during this wave was due to the Western intervention in the Middle East which led to armed conflicts and economic crises such as the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, the oil crisis in the Middle East, and the Iranian revolution. These conflicts explain the emerging religious conscience in Muslims in the United States.<sup>28</sup> However, only the last two periods fall within the scope of this paper, because during my research most of the Muslims who came at El Paso were students.

The Shia community of El Paso originated in Las Cruces in 1983 when Shia students from the Middle East (mainly from Iran) arrived to pursue higher education.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, they began to organize and look for a religious space that could offer them spiritual relief. They rented houses in which to perform their religious prayers and ceremonies. By the early 2000s Shia students in Las Cruces decreased because by then most of them graduated or returned to their original homes. Meanwhile, in El Paso, the number of Shia students increased because the University of Texas at El Paso caught the eye of many Muslim families who sought to send their sons and daughters to study in the United States. Because of the increasing numbers of Muslim students, a religious space was created in El Paso. Through donations, they created a fixed center that is located on Paramount Street Avenue.<sup>30</sup>

Conversely, the Sunni Muslims from El Paso constructed their Mosque, most commonly known as the Islamic Center of El Paso, in 2003, next to the Al-Mahdi Center. The Sunni Islamic Center is a space for conducting religious ceremonies and is also a place for learning. The

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<sup>28</sup>Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* Russell Sage Foundation (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Andy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 11, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Andy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 11, 2016.

mosque provides religious classes for children and offers the books of its small library to its guests. The members that compose the Sunni community of El Paso come from different regions of the world. Many of them are of North African or Middle Eastern descent. But one can also find many white Americans, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans praying in the interiors of the mosque. The education-focused Sunni community especially started to grow because the University of Texas at El Paso attracted many students who sought to pursue a college degree overseas. As they arrived, these devout students sought spiritual spaces to satisfy their religious needs. At first, Sunnis performed their religious practices in an old house near the University. However, as more students arrived in El Paso, and because some of Sunni students remained in this city as they started families, the Sunni community worked together to finance the construction of the Islamic Center.<sup>31</sup>

## **Shia**

On October 11, 2016, I visited the Al-Mahdi Islamic Education Center. When I entered the center, I had to remove my shoes to show respectability and cleanliness.<sup>32</sup> In Muslim religious practices, hygiene is deeply important because Mohamed once stated that “the key to paradise is prayer and the key to prayer is cleanliness. For this reason, if a Muslim prays without being properly clean, his/her prayers could be considered unacceptable. Moreover, cleanliness is not limited to dirt or waste, but also includes contact with objects or items that can be seen as impure such as a corpse, dog’s saliva, or a pig.”<sup>33</sup> On my visit, the lecture was dedicated to the martyrdom of Hussein. After the assassination of his father Ali, Hussein claimed his right to lead the Muslim community. However, his assassination turned him into a martyr for the Shia

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<sup>31</sup> “Being Muslim in El Paso: Inside the Islamic Center,” El Paso Inc, accessed October 30, 2016, [http://www.elpasoinc.com/lifestyle/local\\_features/being-muslim-in-el-paso/article\\_3e13c26a-ed2a-11e5-b894-dfa5624a5977.html](http://www.elpasoinc.com/lifestyle/local_features/being-muslim-in-el-paso/article_3e13c26a-ed2a-11e5-b894-dfa5624a5977.html)

<sup>32</sup> Personal observation, El Paso Texas, October 11, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Tanya Gulevich, *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions*, 199.

Muslims. Every year, on that fateful day, the Shia community commemorates him.<sup>34</sup> The lecture and speeches were given in English and in Arabic. There were no Spanish translations of the texts. Moreover, in contrast to the Sunni Islamic center, where I was given a book in Spanish that associated the Qu´ran and the Bible and supported Muslim beliefs through science, at the Al-Mahdi center I was given the Qu´ran in the English Language. One of the members told me that they had the Qu´ran in Spanish. However, the book never appeared.<sup>35</sup>

In Islam, it is very common for Muslims to create gendered spaces in the public realm. Some Muslim countries separate men and women in mosques, and offer male-only and family sections in restaurants, schools, public beaches, and cinemas. However, gender segregation in Islam is not practiced uniformly in every region of the world. Elements such as culture, class, and religious conviction affect how society practices gender segregation. In religious spaces such as mosques and the Al-mahdi Islamic Education Center, men and women have a separate space to conduct their prayers and socialize. Muslims believe that in order to preserve modest behavior inside a space where an individual can feel a stronger connection with God, both genders should be separated in order to eliminate any immoral behavior between the sexes. Men and women from the same family can socialize freely, but men and women from distinct families are not allowed to socialize. They are expected to mingle solely with friends of their same sex. Moreover, in the public sphere married men and women have to behave with modesty. Therefore, they are expected to not hold hands, kiss, or even touch. This is because these behaviors can be seen by other Muslims as immoral.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “How do Sunni Islam and Shia Differ?,” The New York Times, accessed October 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/world/middleeast/q-and-a-how-do-sunni-and-shia-islam-differ.html?mcubz=0>

<sup>35</sup> Personal observation, El Paso Texas, October 11, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Tanya Gulevich, *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions*, 137.

In the case of Latino Shia Muslims from El Paso, the Al-Mahdi Islamic Education Center is segregated by a curtain no higher than one meter and a half. However, the Muslims of the Al-Mahdi center do not enforce a strict gender segregation space since little children, both girls and boys, are allowed to run throughout the small center, ignoring the small physical barrier that separates both genders. The adults tend to ignore the children, and the fathers allow their small daughters to pray with them in the male section.<sup>37</sup>

According to the Shia members, the function of the Al-Mahdi Islamic Education Center is to provide a space for worship that would allow Shia Muslims to perform religious ceremonies and study Islam. The programs of the center are held on Fridays and they give some lectures about Islam, prayers, and afterword, hold workshops that teach Islam to the youth.<sup>38</sup> The center is open to everyone who is curious enough to learn about the Prophet and the Qu´ran. According to Andy Cruz, another member of the Al-Mahdi center, the majority of non-Arab Muslims are Latinos. More specifically, he says, most of the Shia Muslim Latinos that are active members in the center are of Mexican-American descent.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Sunni**

On September 29, 2017, I entered the Sunni mosque. Similar to the Shia center, one needs to remove his/her shoes before being able to access its interiors. However, in contrast to the Shia center, the Sunni mosque offers a section in the bathroom to allow its members to clean their feet before prayers begin. Because it is not obligatory, most of the Muslims walked directly to the room that is located at the center of the mosque. This area has room for around two hundred members. The cultural diversity in this religious space is inspiring. One can find African Americans, Whites, Arabs, Africans, Latino Muslims, and soldiers praying under one roof in

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<sup>37</sup> Personal observation, El Paso Texas, October 11, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Andy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 11, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Andy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 11, 2016.

peace and harmony. Even though in this room only men are allowed, many fathers bring their daughters with them to pray. Women have a separate room where they can pray and hear the Imam's speech. If one looks closely, at the back of the room there are three large black windows. Behind these darkened windows, women sit in rooms where they cannot see the Imam and men praying, but are able to hear the Imam's speeches. Although the prayers are in Arabic, the Imam's speeches are mainly in English with some Arabic verses. On the day of my visit, the speech focused on the life of Moses and his relevance to modern Muslims. Curiously, the Imam mentioned some changes that American society cause in traditional Muslim families. He stated that living in the United States promoted a rebellious behavior on women since they now often break traditional values by shaking hands with men and sometimes stop wearing the hijab. The meeting ends, most of the members leave the mosque to continue the routine of their daily lives.<sup>40</sup>

In one of my visits to the mosque, one of the Sunni members offered me a book to show me how Islam could positively change my life. He noticed that I am a Mexican national and therefore gave me a Spanish copy. The book, *Una breve guía ilustrada para entender el Islam*, is divided in three chapters. The first chapter aims to persuade its reader that the Qu'ran is a sacred book that holds the literal words of God. In order to demonstrate this, the book argues that the Qu'ran explains or at least mentions several biologic or natural processes that humanity could have not known until the formation of modern science. For example, the author points out that certain passages of the Qu'ran describe the stages of the development of the embryo, the origins of the universe, the darkness that surrounds the deep seas, and the materialization of the cumulonimbus cloud, which is a cloud that produces rain, lighting, and hail.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in order

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<sup>40</sup> Personal Observation, El Paso Texas, October 11, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> A. Ibrahim, *Una Breve Guía Ilustrada para entender el Islam*, 7-8, 17, 24, 26.

to reinforce the Qu´ran´s divine creation, the author mentions several scientists that corroborate the scientific accuracy of the natural processes that the Qu´ran describes.<sup>42</sup> Chapter 2 presents to the reader the religious and social benefits that one could enjoy if he/she accepted Islam in his/her heart. For example, the individual could earn their right to enter paradise, be exempted from hell and its eternal fire, bring him happiness and inner peace, and cleanse his/hers sins.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the last chapter elucidates what Islam´s beliefs, the similarities that the Qu´ran has with the Christian sacred texts, and the impact of Islam in Spain and Latin America.<sup>44</sup> Since the Sunni authorities know that most of the inhabitants of El Paso are from a Mexican and Catholic background, this section of the book is by far one of the most powerful ones because it points out that Islam is not entirely divorced from the Latino community since it has been at the core of their Latinidad ever since the Muslims set foot in the Iberian Peninsula.

## **Methodology**

My thesis augments current research and builds upon the pioneering works of Patrick D. Bowen,<sup>45</sup> Harold Morales,<sup>46</sup> and Hjamil A. Martınez-Vázquez.<sup>47</sup> Bowen´s *U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From “Moors” to “Latino Muslims”* describes the development of Latino Muslim institutions in the United States. He argues that during the 1920s Islam attracted many Latinos, but it would not be until the 1970s when a group of Latinos, who felt that African-Americans and Arab immigrants did not satisfy their social and cultural needs, created institutions such as the Alianza Islamica to promote a Latino Muslim identity.<sup>48</sup> In the eyes of these Latinos, their institution would embrace all races and cultures from Latino descent in the United States.

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<sup>42</sup> A. Ibrahim, *Una Breve Guía Ilustrada para entender el Islam*, 31-36.

<sup>43</sup> A. Ibrahim, *Una Breve Guía Ilustrada para entender el Islam*, 49-52.

<sup>44</sup> A. Ibrahim, *Una Breve Guía Ilustrada para entender el Islam*, 55-70, 76-83.

<sup>45</sup> *U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From “Moors” to “Latino Muslims”*

<sup>46</sup> *Latina/o Muslim Religious Cultures*

<sup>47</sup> *Latina/o Y Musulmán: The construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States*

<sup>48</sup> Patrick D. Bowen, "U. S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From 'Moors' to 'Latino Muslims'," *Journal Of Religious History* 37, no. 2 (June 2013): 167-168. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 15, 2017).

Ironically, since the Latinos who erected the Alianza were Puerto Ricans, they placed Puerto Rican national symbols.<sup>49</sup> Morales' *Latina/o Muslim Religious Cultures* focuses on exploring how the metropolitan spaces and internet has brought Latinos closer to Islam, their conversion process, religious institutions, and social situation after 9/11<sup>50</sup>. He concludes that the physical and technological spaces in which Latino Muslims have coexisted were racially, culturally, and religiously diverse, thereby creating a non-homogenous Latino Muslim community that could not leave behind their national, cultural, and racial differences. As Latino Muslim institutions rose, they fought among each other to monopolize their community's voice, causing a disunited Latino Muslim front. Moreover, he declares that the elements that have defined and unified Latino Muslims have been manifested through narratives of marginalization, reversion to Islam, and their Iberian roots.<sup>51</sup> Lastly, Martínez-Vázquez's *Latina/o Y Musulmán: The construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States* argues that after Latinos embrace Islam as their new faith they restructure their identity through the act of remembering. This process has led Latino Muslims to look at Moorish Spain as their source of inspiration to mold their identity, and therefore challenge the belief that they are intrinsically Catholic by implying that there is not a disconnection between their Latinidad and Islam. Therefore, Latino Muslims use their Muslim identity as a tool to decolonize themselves from the colonial narrative that others have imposed on them.<sup>52</sup>

My thesis seeks to develop an analysis of the way U.S. Latino Muslims use their ethnic cultural practices and Latinidad to reconstruct their identity. "What aspects of a Latina/o identity will be internalized by Muslim born Latina/os? And where will the source of this identity come

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<sup>49</sup> Bowen, "U. S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920," 178.

<sup>50</sup> "Latina/o Muslim Religious Cultures," Academia, accessed December 1, 2017, [http://www.academia.edu/26823271/Latina\\_o\\_Muslim\\_Religious\\_Cultures](http://www.academia.edu/26823271/Latina_o_Muslim_Religious_Cultures)

<sup>51</sup> "Latina/o Muslim Religious Cultures."

<sup>52</sup> Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulmán*, 3-5, 133.

from: their Latina/o Muslim parents, non-Muslim Latina/o families or communities? Will they be taught Islam in Spanish? Will Arabic displace Spanish as a second language? Will they even identify in any substantial way as Latina/o? Given the volatile characteristic of religious affiliation in America, we might also ask if Latina/os born into Islam will continue to identify themselves as Muslim throughout their entire lives, and will they raise their children in Islam? And if they do, what forms of Islam?" are questions I hope this thesis will answer.<sup>53</sup>

In this thesis I used the term cultural language to understand the process by which Latino Muslims negotiate their new identity. Inspired by David Evans' *Language and Identity: Discourse in the World*, I first look at the cultural discourse that Latino Muslims produce when they negotiate their ethnic culture and Latinidad with Islam. By cultural discourse I mean the process by which a set of cultural codes<sup>54</sup> (customs, food, language, beliefs, traditions, religion, behaviors, and myths) are constantly being negotiated by modern states in order to give their society a *raison d'être*. The result of this negotiation generates grammar rules, a set of rules and norms that when put together regulate the nation's cultural behavior and form a coherent cultural language, or a set of cultural practices that gives society a collective national identity. Although the cultural codes that society creates are fluid, complex, merged with other codes, and constantly changing and evolving. I believe, based on my research for this project, that society has a fixed set of grammar rules. Even if some of the modern state's codes change, some of its grammatical rules are so engrained in the collective identity that they are only broken or

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<sup>53</sup> "Latina/o Muslim Religious Cultures."

<sup>54</sup> I think that every society has created their own set of cultural codes that regulate the lives of their members. These societies have their own set of codes (beliefs, customs, language, food, and traditions). What modern nations do is that they study the codes of the societies they rule and choose some of those codes to represent their nation, creating their own national cultural practices (grammatical rules). These national cultural practices represent the state's cultural language, which according to it, every citizen practices.

completely changed through the incorporation of a set of new codes, usually coming about as the result of abrupt social changes that violently destroy the foundations of the old society.

However, since the cultural language that encompasses modern nations is imagined,<sup>55</sup> the individual is free to reject or adopt the state's cultural language. Naturally, those individuals who have been indoctrinated by the state's institutions (church, schools, media,) and conquered by the elite's cultural hegemony are more prone to fall into the fallacy of following the state's cultural language. But El Paso Latino Muslims, living in the middle of three different cultures (American, Mexican, Islam), negotiate the codes of all three cultural languages, which directly or indirectly influence their identity and produces a new cultural language that gives them a *raison d'être* and the experience of cultural transformation and new identity. Therefore, by analyzing the discourse that Latino Muslims produce when they blend their ethnic cultural codes with Islam's religious cultural codes will increase understanding of how Latino Muslims produce a cultural language that has led them to reimagine themselves. The Latino Muslims who are close to their ethnic roots tend to create their cultural language by harmonizing their ethnic cultural practices and Latino identity with Islam. On the other hand, the Latino Muslims who are not close to their ethnic roots, or reject any cultural identity at all, center their cultural language exclusively on their Latino identity. Although both sections of Latino Muslims create their own cultural language, it is important to point out that they share some fixed codes (Spanish language, Latinidad,<sup>56</sup> Muslim religious practices) that demonstrate how connected they are.

Moreover, it is important to state that each Latino creates his/her own and unique cultural language because naturally each one of them negotiated their ethnic cultural codes with Islam's

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<sup>55</sup> I think that modern states have the power of choosing their own set of codes, imagining how they want their community to be. Please refer to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities*.

<sup>56</sup> In this thesis I define Latinidad in the perspective of my interviewees. All of the participants associated their Latinidad to being born in a Mexican family, speaking Spanish, and practicing their Mexican culture (the ones who practice it of course).

differently. However, in the end each Latino Muslim's cultural language is connected to each other because they maintain core elements such as practicing their ethnic cultural practices under Islamic law, adopting their cuisine to conform to Islam's dietary restrictions, and speaking Spanish in order to celebrate their Latinidad as Muslims. In El Paso some Latino Muslims combine their ethnic culture with Islam, which as a result produces a cultural language based on their Mexican ethnic roots. In contrast, the Latino Muslims who do not practice their ethnic culture will instead reimagine their Latinidad until they can harmonize with Islam, usually manifesting itself in the form of a connection to the Moors. However, others, who do not fit in the last cultural languages, will coexist in the middle of three worlds, holding their Latinidad as the core of their identity. Lastly, I am seeking share the invisible lives of the Latino Muslims from El Paso, Texas, in order to that their experiences, struggles, and histories are an important part of the national narrative.

Finding Latino Muslims to interview was relatively easy. Thanks to the help of a Muslim friend, Amir Mohammad Rastegari, I visited the Al-Mahdi Islamic Education Center and the mosque. Although the Trump administration has created a hostile environment against Muslims and the people have valid reasons to be wary of outsiders, the Shia community received me warmly and welcomed me to their religious center. As I was looking members to interview, several Latino Muslims approached me because they were interested in my research. In the mosque, I also had a similar experience. The religious authorities helped me find more Latino Muslims. They even encouraged their Latino members to participate in my study. In the case of women, it was easier to find Latinas in the Shia center because there are sections inside the Al-Mahdi Center where one can socialize with members of the opposite sex. Conversely, the Sunni

mosque does not have these sections. Therefore, I had to ask Omar Hernández, the Mosque's spokesman, to help me out.

Thanks to the help of the members of the mosque and the Al-Mahdi Center, I interviewed nine Mexican-American Latino Muslims: five Shia and four Sunni. Of the nine persons I interviewed, five of them were women because I believe that men and women have different experiences after they adopt Islam as their new faith. Of these five women, three are Shia and two are Sunni. I interviewed these nine Latino Muslims because they are currently active members in their religious communities. I chose active members because it was easier for me to find Latino Muslims in Islamic religious centers than by locating them through other means. And most importantly, I chose these individuals because they are practicing Islam. If they did not follow the teachings of Islam and the Qu'ran, it would be very difficult to have categorized them as Muslims.

The information I collected from my interviews are valuable pieces of information that have helped me support the base of this thesis. However, as any other piece of evidence they are not free from flaws. Naturally, I treated my participant's interviews as stories that "cannot be viewed as pure history." I took into consideration several elements. Since this work will be published and open to the public through the university, many of my interviewees were hesitant to participate in this project. Some of them accepted to be a part of this project as long as their real names were reserved in anonymity. However, it is natural for all of them to silence certain parts of their lives, exaggerate or misremember events, and/or tell me information that they suppose I want to hear.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, similarly to what Martínez-Vázquez found in his research, the interviews I organized have persuaded me to believe that conversion is not a fixed event, but rather a process that has motivated Latino Muslims to reconstruct their identities until

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<sup>57</sup> Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulmán*, 42-43.

they create a new cultural language that encompasses both of their identities: Latino and Muslim.<sup>58</sup>

In order to unveil this new cultural language, I divided my questionnaire in five sections. In the first section, I seek to understand the reasons that persuaded Latino Muslims to adopt Islam as their new faith, and see how they have blended their Mexican customs with Islam in order to understand the cultural contrasts that Latino Muslims negotiate. I am studying the difficulty of their transition to Islam, if they still practice their Latino customs, and how their customs conflict with Islam. In the second section, I look at how difficult has been adopting the dietary laws of Islam, if they still eat Mexican food and how their identity has changed with their diets. In the third section, I study how the Spanish and Arabic language have motivated Latino Muslims to reinvent themselves; I am interested in knowing how Spanish and Arabic have influenced them in the way they think about themselves. In the fourth section, I analyze how Islam has affected or influenced their Latinidad: I ask them about how they perceive themselves as Latinos and if they feel a connection to Moorish Spain.

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<sup>58</sup> Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulmán*, 8.

## NEGOTIATING CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The term “Muslim culture” vaguely describes the diverse cultural groups that comprise Islam: for example, “the Asian Muslims, the Middle Eastern, the African, the European and the American Muslims.”<sup>59</sup> Most of the Islamic customs and traditions within these groups have been more influenced by cultural factors than by the religion per se. Nonetheless, there are some cultural norms that have been accepted by all Muslims. For example: all Muslims believe that there is only one God, they believe in the Holy Scriptures (the Qu´ran, and the Bible), they believe in prophets like Adam and Mohamed, they believe they should represent God or any of his prophets in any form of visual representation, they follow dietary restrictions like avoiding pork and alcohol, they participate in celebrations like Ramadan, believe women should wear the hijab (not obligatory in certain communities), and they believe in social distance among genders (a man cannot touch a woman that is not his wife or relative).<sup>60</sup>

The motives that drive Latinos to become Muslims differ from person to person, but mostly in El Paso it is because they are disillusioned with their Catholic faith, they socially interact with Muslims or marry one. Joshua Carrasco is a Latino Mexican-American Muslim who has been living in Ciudad Juárez for the last seven years. Before becoming a Muslim, he struggled to comprehend several Catholic religious practices and customs. For example, he did not understand why in some churches the saints were more glorified than God *per se* if the Bible prohibited Catholics to not believe or worship false deities. Although most of his life he has been a Catholic, Joshua explained to me that he has followed the Catholic Church and its religious customs simply because he was following his family’s traditions. Since he was a child, he was pressured by his relatives to “follow the rules” and therefore attended church. For this same

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<sup>59</sup> “Muslim culture.” Last accessed November 26, 2016. <http://sharonpluralism.org/cultural-protocols/muslim-culture/>

<sup>60</sup> “Muslim culture.” Last accessed November 26, 2016. <http://sharonpluralism.org/cultural-protocols/muslim-culture/>

reason, his wedding was a Catholic ceremony and he perpetrated his family's traditions because they were tradition<sup>61</sup>

As time passed on, Joshua contacted a friend who, to his surprise, was a Muslim. The way his friend was praying caught Joshua's eye. Joshua's curiosity about his friend's faith drove him to discuss the differences between Catholics and Muslims. Both of them took out their religious books and started to debate. Joshua's curiosity grew as the discussion continued, so, in order to find more information about, Islam his friend took him to the mosque to speak to one of the Muslim religious authorities. Joshua and Yahya, one of the religious authorities, compared the Bible and the Qu'ran. After a couple hours of debating their religious views, Joshua felt in his heart that the verses of the Qu'ran were truly God's words. That same day he accepted Islam and for the first time in his life, felt God's love.<sup>62</sup>

For Joshua, it was easy to leave behind the ideals of his previous faith for Islam because of the disillusionment he had regarding certain Catholic religious ideals. He disliked the idea of the priest's power to absolve Christians from their sins, and the central role of Jesus, who was worshiped as a god, in the Catholic faith. In contrast, Islam offered a solution to Joshua's religious doubts: Islam offers its pious followers a direct relationship to God without the intervention of third parties such as priests, and Islam's teachings were easier for him to comprehend. Additionally, during his visit to the mosque he discovered that the Bible stated that Jesus described his own divinity as being powered by God, providing Joshua a logical response towards Jesus' divine powers: he is not God himself, but a prophet divinely inspired by God. In fact, he could not find out one verse in the Bible where Jesus described himself as the son of

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<sup>61</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

God. This gave him the impression that the Catholic Church manipulated the Bible to serve its own religious needs.<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, the disillusionment of Catholicism sometimes presents itself when Latinos are forced to defend their Catholic ideas. Amanda Martínez is a Mexican American who was born in a Muslim Mexican-American family. She is currently a teacher and the assistant principal at the Palm Tree Academy. The first member of her family to become a Muslim was her uncle from her father's side. Her uncle, a devout Catholic had met two Muslim men from Saudi Arabia. Eventually, religion entered their discussion, and they started to debate their religious views. After their conversation finished, he abandoned his Catholic beliefs for Islam.<sup>64</sup> Although Amanda does not completely remember what drove her uncle to choose Islam as his new faith, it is safe to state that his religious debate with Muslims sparked in his mind a religious crisis. As we will see, in the eyes of some Latinos, Catholicism has several paradoxes (the holy trinity, saints, and Jesus and God as the same divine entity) that are difficult to comprehend. Her uncle would have struggled to defend his religious beliefs, and after seeing that Islam could offer him concrete answers, his curiosity led him to read the Qu'ran.

Eventually, her uncle returned home as a proud Muslim man, announcing vivaciously his conversion to the rest of his family. However, his nuclear family did not support his decision. In fact, they chose to debate his Muslim religious views. Surprisingly, after constant debates, her uncle's relatives became Muslims. It is probable that Islam could have attracted Amanda's family to be Muslims because Islam offered what was to them a more logical set of beliefs. In other words, beliefs that were easier for them to comprehend. Her grandmother was the second Muslim convert of her family, and due to this matriarchal example, the rest of Amanda's uncles

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<sup>63</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

and aunts followed the steps of Amanda's grandmother. But Amanda's mother did not adopt Islam instantly. She instead chose to debate with her mother-in-law. Their discussion left Amanda's mother on her knees; she later visited a priest to ask him several questions regarding some Catholic religious views. She was bewildered and sad because the priest did not give Amanda's mother a concrete answer to her religious dilemmas, which were elicited by debating Amanda's grandmother. Amanda's mother wanted concrete answers, and therefore she started to explore Islam. Eventually, she saw Islam as an answer to her religious crisis. When she became a Muslim, her husband followed her steps.<sup>65</sup>

In the same manner, Omar Hernandez's family converted to Islam. The first one of his relatives to become a Muslim was one of his uncles from his mother's side. A religious debate with Muslims induced his uncle to question his religious beliefs and find a creed that could bring harmony to his religious crisis. During the 1970s, soldiers from Saudi Arabia came to the United States to be military trained. His uncle was surprised when he saw several Muslim Arab men drinking at the bar. His curiosity drove him to initiate a friendly conversation with them. Eventually, they discussed and debated their religious ideas among each other. During their conversation, his uncle realized that he struggled to defend several Catholic religious beliefs and practices; he observed that they were not written in the Bible. Instead of finding answers, he found contradictory arguments between the Bible and the Catholic Church. The concept of the trinity contradicted the Christian ideal of only one God and the Mass's mystification of converting tangible objects into the flesh of God was a preposterous religious idea for Omar's uncle. After this religious debate, his uncle became a Muslim.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

The unexpected conversion of Omar's uncle into Islam brought religious concerns to the rest of his family. As his uncle's relatives prepared themselves to debate his uncle's new religion, they also discovered several Catholic beliefs that contradicted each other. Although the Catholic Church argues that Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit are one entity, the family read in the Bible that Jesus did not present himself as the son of God; instead, they found out that he described himself as the son of man. Why is he calling himself that? Is he also the son of the Adam and Eve? In the book of Leviticus they read a passage that ordered Christians to avoid eating pork. Lastly, the Catholic depictions of Jesus and María astonished them. These images represented Jesus as a man with a big beard and Maria using a scarf. The family presumed that Muslims were faithfully practicing the words of God because Muslims did not eat alcohol, Muslim women used scarfs, and Muslim men did not shave their faces.<sup>67</sup>

Omar Hernandez's family inquired about the origins of the Bible. They have come to believe that it was composed by manuscripts that have been changed overtime by priests and Catholic religious authorities. For example, Omar told me that in the Bible there are four gospels that are supposed to describe the life of Jesus. However, according to Omar, they tend to have discrepancies between them, giving the impression that the authors misremembered the events. As a result, the family questioned the credibility of the Bible.<sup>68</sup>

Eventually, his uncle convinced his closest relatives to become Muslims. Consequently, Omar's mother became a Muslim. However, his father opted to not accept Islam since he was devoted to his Catholic roots; they eventually divorced. Years later his mother remarried and convinced her new husband, a Mexican-American, to become a Muslim.<sup>69</sup> After Omar chose to become a Muslim, his father had conflicting sentiments. Nevertheless, he accepted Omar's

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<sup>67</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

decision and did not stop loving him. But apparently, Omar's conversion to Islam was taboo for his father. Instead of asking Omar about his faith, he asked Omar's wife in order to better understand Omar's new cultural practices.<sup>70</sup>

Years after his conversion, Omar reflected on his previous religious practices and concluded that Catholics expected other Catholics to follow the Church with absolute loyalty, even if one did not completely understand the faith. For example, he realized that his family had celebrated several Catholic customs without knowing their significance. Many Catholics practiced them, Omar continued, because they are traditions that have been passed from generation to generation. But as time passes, these practices lose their meaning. In fact, it would not be until he became a Muslim that he learned the true meaning of some of the Catholic religious practices he used to celebrate. For example, in Christian and Muslim baptisms it is very common to shave the baby's head. While many Catholics do not know why, Omar explained to me that Muslims cut it because it is a custom to weight the baby's hair in silver and donate it to the poor. Lastly, he remembered one of the principal aspects that motivated him to follow Islam when he was twelve years old. According to Omar, in the Bible in John 16:12-24, Jesus stated that someone else would come after him. In that moment, he realized that Jesus was speaking about a new prophet: Mohamed.<sup>71</sup>

Vilma Luna is A Mexican-American Muslim who currently is volunteering at the mosque. Before becoming a Muslim, she was a devout Catholic woman, but as time passed, she lost interest in her Catholic faith. Still identifying herself as a Christian, she sought a church that could warmly receive her. Eventually, she found a non-denominational Church, a Christian church that accepts anyone from any faith, where she attended mass to worship the Lord.

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<sup>70</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

However, Vilma felt that this church did not fulfill her. She still had religious questions that neither the Catholic Church nor the non-denominational church could answer; she needed something more: concrete answers.<sup>72</sup>

Since she was a small child, Vilma Luna understood that although she was raised as a Catholic, she did not agree with some of the Catholic Church's traditional customs and beliefs. For example, she argued with her mom about the depiction of religious figures such as Jesus and God in visual representations and she disliked the idea of God and Jesus being the same divine entity. Not satisfied with her mom's answers, she explored other Christian religions to find an answer to her religious confusion. Disappointed in their answers, her religious journey led her to explore other religions. Additionally, she was captivated by the hijab because it covered her body and believed that it could protect her from being object of men's temptation.<sup>73</sup>

She explored the religious beliefs of Islam which ultimately send her to the front doors of the Islamic Center of El Paso. She was captivated by the hijab because it covered her body and believed that it could protect her from tempting men. However, this was not the first contact that Vilma had with Islam. She was introduced to this faith fifteen year ago when she was studying at UTEP. During her college years, Vilma's friend and Vilma were invited by a Muslim organization to learn more about Muslims. Enamored with the religion, Vilma's friend accepted Islam in her heart that same day. However, Vilma hesitated, and at the end she chose to keep practicing her Catholic faith. Thirteen years later, Vilma contacted her Muslim friend, hoping that Islam had an answer to her religious questions. Vilma's friend invited Vilma to the Friday

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<sup>72</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

prayer, and after it ended Vilma talked to one of the religious authorities of the mosque to learn more about the Islamic religion. At the end of the day, she happily accepted Islam.<sup>74</sup>

While some Latinos convert to Islam when they question their Catholic religious views, others are prompted to explore the religion when they marry a member. Alma Cruz is a retired Mexican-American who practiced dentistry when she lived in Juárez. After she came to El Paso, she stopped working as a dentist with the purpose of dedicating her life to the well-being of a person who suffered from a physical disability. She discovered Islam when she married her husband, a Shia Muslim. Alma was curious about the faith of her husband. While her husband's influence was paramount, one of the reasons why Alma studied Islam was because she did not completely understand some of her traditional Catholic beliefs. For example, she found the definition of the Holy Trinity confusing: Even though there is only one God in Christianity, Alma wondered, how is it possible that Jesus is also considered a deity? For Alma, there were too many paradoxes in Catholicism. In contrast, Alma felt that the teachings of Islam were clearer and easier to comprehend. Moreover, she detested the idea of representing the Saints and Jesus in visual depictions. Hesitating to take a decision that would change her entire life, she asked her then fiancé for guidance; he introduced her to a female Mexican Muslim to explain the beliefs of Islam. Her future husband and his friend were not the only factors that encouraged Alma to become a Shia Muslim. She chose to become a Shia because of its intellectual and philosophic discourse regarding the prophet and the Qu'ran. After the example of her husband and the conversation with his friend, Alma abandoned the path of her old faith.<sup>75</sup>

Flor Lozano is a Mexican-American housewife, currently living in El Paso, who was born in Coahuila, México. After reaching adulthood, she traveled to El Paso to study at El Paso

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<sup>74</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 18, 2016.

Community College. There she met Asaad Ibrahim, her future husband. She became a Muslim when she married Asaad. Eventually, the constant religious practices of her husband caught her eye, and with time, curiosity attracted her to Islam. Her Catholic family was worried when Flor announced her love for Asaad. However, even though the family had several misconceptions regarding Muslims, they accepted the union because they saw Asaad's kindness and love.<sup>76</sup>

### **Transition**

The transition from Catholicism to Islam was relatively easy for most of the Latino Muslims who participated in this study. But for recent converts like Joshua, who has been a Muslim for only four weeks, adapting new religious practices drastically altered their way of life. As a new Muslim, he is trying to learn the five pillars and follow them strictly to show his devotion to Allah. He tries to pray five times a day, but he struggles. Although he sometimes cannot do all his prayers, he knows that his effort is the only proof that God needs. Therefore, each time he misses a prayer, he asks God for his forgiveness through his prayers. He admires the five pillars of Islam because they were created with the purpose of making human beings better individuals, strengthening human's bond with God, and creating social conscience towards the poor during religious festivities such as the Ramadan. He believes that, in contrast, the leaders of the Catholic Church are hypocrites: men ruling in golden thrones surrounded by immense wealth while the poor suffered, abandoned by the man of faith who swore to God to protect them. Another difficulty he had was praying in public. At first, he was worried about the opinions of others at work, but instead of being rejected by his co-workers, he found they respected his faith. While at work, he prays in the bathroom or in the storage room.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

Joshua's conversion to Islam was unexpected to his family. His wife never expected that Joshua would one day leave the house as a Catholic to later return home as a Muslim. Nevertheless, his wife accepted his decision. Naturally, tensions aroused when she felt that Joshua could disrupt the harmony of the home by persuading their two children to become Muslims. During the first days of his conversion, she told Joshua that she would not like to see their children stop believing in Jesus or Virgin Mary. Eventually, Joshua asked her to wife for permission to take their daughter to the mosque in order to alleviate the concerns regarding Joshua's new religious practices; she agreed. Strangely, when Joshua went to the mosque he left her daughter at the vehicle. Yaya, one of the religious authorities, convinced him to bring her daughter inside the mosque. As Joshua and his daughter entered the mosque, one of the "sisters" welcomed them and gave his daughter water and chips. He noticed that the religious members of the mosque treated his daughter with kindness and did not try to force their religious views on her. Before taking his daughter to the mosque, he used to pray in the bathroom in order to keep his religious practices in private. After his daughter got familiarized with her father's beliefs, Joshua started to be more religiously overt at home, praying in the kitchen and in the living room.<sup>78</sup>

Religiously speaking, for Flor, the transition from Christianity to Islam did not cause internal conflicts because some of the most important Christian religious customs are also practiced in Islam. For example, the family disliked the visual representation of the saints and Jesus, and when they learned that her future husband did not subscribe to visual depictions of God or religious icons, it was easier for them to accept her daughter's religious conversion. For Flor Islam was the continuation of Catholicism. Her family is very conservative, but when they

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<sup>78</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

saw Flor wearing the hijab, instead of opposing her, they accepted it because it covered her body, and therefore it protected her innocence.<sup>79</sup>

On the other hand, Alma's transition from Catholicism to Islam was difficult. One of the major hindrances regarding her new faith was her devout Catholic family. Her relatives opposed Alma's decision to abandon Catholicism because, in their eyes, Islam is a faith of radical beliefs that oppresses women. The family tried to stop Alma from socializing with her new group of friends. However, Alma loved the idea of becoming a Shia Muslim because it was her own choice, not her family's. After her conversion, Alma found it difficult to perform some of the Muslim practices. For example, it was hard for her to pray three times a day. Even though she had the conviction, it was not a habit. Eventually, she adopted it.<sup>80</sup>

Since Omar has been practicing Islam since he was 12 years old, the transition to Islam was relatively easy for him. In fact, born in Mexican American family that has been living in the United States for three generations, Omar has never been connected to Mexico's cultural practices. He has never in his life practiced any national or ethnic Mexican customs. Although the family had celebrated Christmas and Easter due to their Catholic roots, after their conversion they stopped. Instead of Christian holidays, they started to celebrate Muslim religious festivities.<sup>81</sup>

Although it was easy for Vilma to adopt and practice Islam, she had to completely renounce her former Catholic customs. Before being a Muslim, Vilma used to have a picture of Jesus Christ carrying his cross while Maria looked, an image that inspired her spiritually. She did not believe in that saints or God should be depicted in visual images, but she loved this painting. However, after converting to Islam she remembered that this image was created by men. She

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<sup>79</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

removed it from her wall because she understood that sometimes people tend to glorify visual depictions of Jesus and God so much that the image begin to acquire a certain degree of divinity detracting from the divinity of God and Vilma believes that there is nothing on this earth that can be holier than God himself.<sup>82</sup>

### **Cultural Language**

When Latino Muslims choose to keep practicing their ethnic roots when they become Muslims, they are to negotiate their both distinct cultural practices until they form a coherent cultural language that gives them a new identity. In the following examples, I will show how the Latino Muslims from El Paso negotiated their Mexican cultural customs with Islam's religious practices, generating new grammatical rules that compose their cultural language. It is important to point out that although not all Latino Muslims harmonized their Mexican cultural customs, choosing to reject some of them in favor of Islam, the discourse that this cultural negotiation produced sheds light on how they collectively create a new cultural language.

Before converting to Islam, Joshua celebrated el día de los muertos. He went to visit the altars at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, which celebrated important historical figures of Mexico. There was food, music, and the performance of various priests that blessed the altars. Finally, at the end of the day his family created an altar in the house to honor their deceased family members. However, now that he is a Muslim, he knows that he cannot longer participate in this event because it has a religious connotation: praying and blessing the death. Joshua told me that he is trying to find a solution that could alleviate any family tensions due to his new religious practices. He can accompany his family to visit the altars at the university, Joshua told me, but he cannot support it at home.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

Since he has lived in Juárez for seven years, he has become accustomed to celebrating the Mexican national holidays. National days such as independence, revolution, and La batalla de Puebla are celebrated in his house. People invite their relatives and friends to eat Mexican food and drink alcohol. He told me that he will continue celebrating these holidays as long as they do not have a religious origin. The proximity of Mexico makes him more prone to continue celebrating the Mexican national holidays. However, he cannot celebrate other holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, because they have religious origins. In order to avoid family tensions, he is focusing on how his family can celebrate these important holidays without offending family or friends. He mentioned that if his family continues to respect his religious beliefs, then they will continue to be a family. If not, Joshua worries that the tensions could lead to divorce.<sup>84</sup>

Curiously, when Joshua was a Catholic, he did not practice any Catholic religious traditions. This, however, did not disrupt his family's harmony. But when he became a Muslim, his conversion caused tension between him and his wife, whose strong Catholic sentiments caused her to question Joshua's religious decisions. In the end, Joshua told me that they could continue to be a family if they respected, tolerated, and cared for each other. Ultimately, even though Joshua has a strong connection to Mexico because he has lived for seven years in the country, speaks Spanish, celebrates Mexican national holidays, and interacts with Mexicans, in the end he sees himself as an American trying to learn another culture.<sup>85</sup> As we can see, Joshua is currently negotiating his Mexican cultural practices with Islam. However, what I want to point out is that his Muslim identity is inducing him to negotiate which parts of his Mexican cultural practices he will preserve and which ones he will reject.

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<sup>84</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

While Joshua is still trying to accommodate his new religious practices, other Latinos who have been Muslims for a longer period of time have already harmonized both cultural practices. Flor celebrates with her husband and children some Mexican customs when she visits her family. She celebrates Christmas with piñatas and during día de los Muertos, Flor goes to the cemetery to put flowers on the graves of her relatives. She does not see any conflict with her faith since Islam encourages its pious followers to respect the deceased. Interestingly, even though Flor was born in Mexico, she does not celebrate any Mexican national holidays; however, she identifies as Mexican.<sup>86</sup>

In another example, Alma Cruz does not celebrate Christmas because when she had her kids, she wanted them to be raised in a Muslim environment. She isolated them from Christmas principally because she did not want to confuse them by celebrating a day that implied that Jesus was the son of God. She also noticed that during this holiday many businesses bombarded customers with advertisements that try to induce them to buy gifts, a consumerist practice that she views as wrong. She does celebrate el día de Muertos. A couple a years ago she started to celebrate it because it is also a tradition that Islam celebrates. Since in the eyes of Alma, these two cultural practices do not conflict, she and her husband go to the cemetery to honor their deceased. However, ultimately Alma feels that the more she knows about Islam, the more disconnected she feels from Mexico.<sup>87</sup>

### **Muslims born in Muslim families**

Kathy Cruz is a student from the University of Texas at El Paso who was raised in a Muslim Family. The daughter of Alma Cruz, she continues the family tradition of celebrating el día de los muertos because there are some similarities between this Mexican cultural practice and

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<sup>86</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

Islam; they both honor the principle of honoring deceased. Since her mother does not celebrate any national day, it is natural for Kathy to follow the steps of her mother. For this reason, she mentioned that they currently do not celebrate Christmas or New Year's Eve. However, contrary to her mother, who feels disconnected from Mexico, when Kathy became a Muslim, her mother's ethnic root induced her to associate her identity with Mexico and therefore look at similarities between Islam and her ethnic origins. She believes that the independence of Mexico is identical to dictates of Islam because they both advocate for people's rights and champion justice. Contrary to her mother, she feels a strong relationship to Mexico and also Iran. She identifies with the Mexican and Iranian population due to her ethnicity (her father is from Iran). She feels she understands both culture's struggles as immigrants and she disapproves how the American government has worked so hard to strip them of their dignity. She puts herself in the immigrants' shoes; "I could be one of them," she stated.<sup>88</sup>

Amanda did not practice many Mexican cultural practices. Since she comes from a family that has lived for three to four generations in the United States, naturally her bond towards her Mexican culture is weak. Americanization significantly disrupted her identification with her Mexican heritage. Nevertheless, she keeps celebrating several Mexican customs at home during some Muslims festivities; she uses piñatas and usually ends Muslim celebrations by giving traditional candy bags to the guests. Contrary to Alma and Flor, Amanda does not celebrate el día de los muertos because she does not see similarities between that day and Islam. Moreover, she does not celebrate her relatives' birthdays or her own since becoming Muslim. She recognizes the celebration but because Mohamed did not celebrate his own birthday she makes the day one of gratitude to God for life.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

## **Muslims who do not practice their ethnic cultural practices**

Not all Muslim converts incorporate aspects of their Mexican culture; there are Latino Muslims that reject their ethnic cultural practices which instead pushes them to reimagine their Latinidad until they can harmonize it with Islam (read the Language chapter for more information). In this section, I will present these Latinos and describe how they have experienced Islam. Daniel García is a Mexican-American who was born in El Paso, Texas. Religion has always been one of his passions. In fact, instead of limiting himself to Christianity, he read the holy scriptures of other religions, including Islam. His motives for becoming a Muslim originated when his first child was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors told Daniel that his son would only live for two years. During the chemotherapy, he witnessed the deaths of many other children. He saw their parents crying over their beds and praying in vain to God for some hope. Emotionally broken, he realized that his son's life and fate were beyond his control. In the end, he put the life of his son in the hands of God.<sup>90</sup>

Islam is an Arabic word that means submission, meaning that human beings should submit to God's will. Although Daniel was ready to accept the worst pain a father could bear, the death of a child, his son's health suddenly started to improve. The doctors suggested that he was not going to survive, but Daniel's son fully recovered. This miracle taught Daniel the meaning of Islam: one should be willing to submit his life to God's hands and be willing to accept His decisions. After this experience, he studied the Qu'ran for five years and found many similarities between the Catholic faith and Islam. For example, he realized that Jesus was also an important prophet in the holy scriptures of the Qu'ran. Moreover, according to Daniel, Jesus taught Islam. In Daniel's eyes, Jesus demonstrated submission to God when he was in the cross.

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

“That is what Islam is,” Daniel told me. The Qu’ran made Daniel García a Muslim and under the guidance of Imam Ali ibn Abu, he became a Shia Muslim.<sup>91</sup>

Daniel’s parents accepted his conversion since they knew that he had a curiosity about religion and God. However, his wife was scared and did not approve his conversion to Islam. For this reason, the couple separated. Daniel says that his conversion was the main factor behind his divorce; however, one of his sons argues the opposite (discussed in Ricardo’s interview). After the separation, his third son, Ricardo García, seen by his father as more open minded, was the only one to follow the steps of his father. In contrast, Daniel’s first born and daughter stayed with their mother.<sup>92</sup>

In terms of customs and culture, even though his mother, a Mexican-American, taught Daniel both Mexican and America cultures, to this day Daniel does not celebrate any Mexican customs or cultural practices since he grew in an environment where the American culture was dominant. When he was young he celebrated cinco de Mayo, but after his conversions he did not. Daniel says that growing under two different cultures makes him feel trapped in the middle of two worlds. In the end Daniel does not celebrate any cultural practices in his home because, as a Shia Muslim, he believes that culture can lead a person to follow an altered form of Islam.<sup>93</sup>

Ricardo García, son of Daniel García, is a Latino-Muslim student who is currently working as a mechanic assistant in El Paso, Texas. Because his great grandparents were former braceros, he reserves in his heart a special love for hard-work and education. His childhood was marked with an appreciation of his father’s fascination with religion and its history. As a little boy, he remembers his father singing him Catholic Bible stories. He also remembers that after his father became a Muslim, his parent divorced. However, contrary to what Daniel said, his son

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<sup>91</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

mentions that the religion was not the main cause of the divorce. Although his siblings were not surprised or supportive when their father converted to Islam, they still lived in harmony. Ricardo believes that his father could sometimes be a possessive person, and as a consequence, family tensions escalated. Ricardo stayed with his dad because he felt that he could not leave him alone.<sup>94</sup>

Ricardo decided to become a Muslim because he wanted to share his life with his dad. When he was a child, his father read him the Bible, the New Testament, and showed him the similarities that Christianity had to Islam. After Ricardo's conversion, he did not struggle to adapt to the new norms of his faith. He stopped celebrating Thanksgiving Day and Christmas, unless he was with his Catholic side of his family. However, he has felt curiosity towards el día de los muertos. Even though he has no intentions to celebrate it, he would like to see the festivity at least once in his life. He is proud that at home there are no celebrations of Mexican or Catholic culture; their main inspiration is Islam. As a kid, he remembers seeing some piñatas; however, after his conversion, his father stopped using them and or even celebrating festivities at all.<sup>95</sup>

As a young man, one of the most difficult aspects of Islam Ricardo copes with is the social distance between him and a woman. Since he was a teenager, he considered himself a lover boy; one of those people who fell in love easily with girls and adored their beauty. Although he was quite romantic, not many girls were interested in him. The problem in Islam, he laments, is that there are no dates between a man and a woman and that one cannot physically touch a woman. If you are interested in a girl, he says, it is because you are considering marriage in the future. Ricardo copes with the situation by studying and working all the time. Moreover, he realizes that a man should be prepared to commit his life to a woman. He knows that

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<sup>94</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

“eventually the right woman will come. I have to man up.” For Ricardo, manhood will come in his early 30s because in order to be a man, one should have a car, career, economic stability, and experience.<sup>96</sup>

Interestingly, even though Vilma was raised in a Mexican American family, she does not see herself as Mexican or even practice her family’s ethnic cultural practices. Since Vilma Luna sees herself more as an American, she does not feel a strong connection to Mexico or to her family’s ethnic traditions and customs. If she celebrated in the past, Vilma remembers, it was because she respected her parents or they forced her. For example, when she was a child her mother coerced her to worship statues of baby Jesus every Christmas.<sup>97</sup>

The lack of a Mexican identity made it easy for Vilma to adopt Islam’s religious practices because she did not have to replace or even harmonize the two different cultures. She was able to rehearse Islam’s prayers, spoken in Arabic, pray five times a day, and adopt the hijab with almost no difficulties. “You just need to adjust yourself,” Vilma declared. The Muslim religious cultural practices, such as Ramadan, captivated Vilma. For her, fasting during the day for one month was an intimidating experience. But when she went to the mosque and saw the sisters praying in a harmonious synchrony, she felt a beautiful sense of wholeness. She cannot fast every day because she has a disease in her lungs; however, she tries her best. Another Muslim practice that attracted Vilma was the discouragement of physical contact between men and women. She considers covering the female form as a way of protecting the sexual morality of women. She believes that it is natural for men to be tempted by women because even the most innocent touch between the sexes could provoke a strong, immoral desire. Lastly, although

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<sup>96</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

Muslims believe that women gain more blessings if they pray at home, she likes to pray at the mosque with her friends and participate in the mosque's religious and social activities.<sup>98</sup>

## **Clothing**

Islam's cultural language mandates that women wear the hijab. A Latina's willingness to adopt this code and harmonize it with her Latinidad represents the incorporation of a new of codes that form a part of their hybrid cultural language. Although it is encouraged, the Muslims of El Paso do not force women to cover themselves with the hijab; it is the woman's choice. The hijab is one of the most difficult decisions Latinas make. While men have the liberty to show or hide their faith at any moment of their lives, the hijab publicly declares that a woman is Muslim. As most of the interviews in this essay show, the hijab is a daunting issue for relatives and friends. Some Latina Muslims experience discrimination, mockery, and even confrontations with relatives since their families fear that their daughter/sister/mother will lose her previous culture and Latinidad.<sup>99</sup> But as we will see, most Latinas see the hijab as a tool for protecting their sexual morality and fighting sexual harassment.

Regarding the controversy of the wearing of the hijab in Western society, sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar writes that there are several differences between an "'open' approach to gender relations and a 'covered one'" in how different patriarchal societies treat women. In the covered system, the patriarchy seeks to cover the body of women in order to maintain their norms of modesty. As Khosrokhavar explains that, "Modesty and honor are defined in direct relation to the bodily and mental covering-over of the women (woman as the shield of honor for the community; the woman as manager of private space, closed to public space)."<sup>100</sup> NNaturally,

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<sup>98</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

<sup>99</sup> María Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto, and John Tofik Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 264.

<sup>100</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University press: Princeton and Oxford, 2007),

these societies tend to protect the purity of their women by separating the sexes. On the other hand, in an open system, the patriarchy seeks to expose the body of women and discourage its invisibility; in an open system “a certain type of voyeurism and exhibitionism . . . is positively valued. . . . The language of the body is that of its accessibility to the other sex.”<sup>101</sup> However, it is necessary to point out that all the female interviewees in this study were not forced to use to hijab. Of their own volition, every one of them chose to adopt it in order to show their devotion to God.

In Western culture, we tend to portray the hijab as a form of oppression against Muslim women. But for Flor, her hijab represents her Muslim identity, respectability, peace, trustworthiness, and freedom. According to Flor, the hijab liberated her from the sexual harassment of men and their piropos. At first, Flor felt that it was difficult to wear the hijab because doing so proclaimed her a Muslim and she worried about what other people would say about her in public since she sometimes feels wearing the hijab that she attracts negative attention.<sup>102</sup>

For Alma the hijab represents security, respect, and freedom from sexual harassment. She states that when she goes into the public sphere, instead of facing discrimination, she feels safe. Apparently, there is little overt discrimination against Muslim Latino women at El Paso. However, when Alma embraced Islam, her family called the family priest to convince her not to change her religion and pressured her to stop wearing the hijab. In order to avoid problems in the private sphere, or put her job at risk, Alma does not wear the hijab inside the house and in the

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<sup>101</sup> Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 155.

<sup>102</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 18, 2016.

workplace. In Juarez, she says, she did not face discrimination. At first, most of her friends experienced a cultural resistance; however, as time went by most of them got used to it.<sup>103</sup>

Kathy Cruz was influenced by her mother to use the hijab. When she was young, her parents explained the philosophy behind the hijab and its connection to God. When she was in high school, she started to wear it in order to show her family that she had accepted Islam in her heart. Additionally, one of her friends in middle school inspired her to wear it. Her friend wore the hijab in school and was teased and bullied by other students. Kathy watched her friend face her harassers and continue to wear the hijab. Because Kathy was more reserved, she thought that wearing it would not only demonstrate her faith, but also give her confidence and strength.<sup>104</sup>

Kathy believes that her hijab protects her moral dignity by covering her body. If she uses it, God is protecting her from sexual harassment. Interestingly, she believes that by using the hijab she is also helping men because in their nature, they are prone to be sexually attracted to women. She believes that if she is not wearing it, she is adding to their lust. She is also aware than in western countries such as the United States, men create women's fashion and impose an ethos that encourages young women to dress sexually suggestive. As Kathy continues, she claims that this type of clothing has been purposely designed to please men's sexual desires.<sup>105</sup>

Although Kathy felt that it was at first difficult to use the hijab, overtime she feels that people respect her more. When she started to use the hijab in high school, she was ridiculed by her classmates who called her a terrorist. Some of them would even try to take her hijab off of her head. But everything changed when she attended The University of Texas at El Paso; she saw an abrupt change. Students were more respectful. And instead of harassing her, they would ask her why she is wearing it. She liked that other students were interested in her hijab because it

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<sup>103</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>104</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

showed her that these individuals were willing to learn more about her Muslim faith.

Unfortunately, Kathy feels that discrimination against Muslims is still prevalent, primarily by Anglo men, so she gravitates towards the Mexican and African American communities who also struggle with discrimination.<sup>106</sup>

From the moment Vilma started to wear the hijab, she feared that other people would discriminate against her. On the contrary, she noted that people started to open the door for her and offer their help; she felt respected. Of course, when she goes in public she feels that other people are giving her “bad looks,” but she tries to ignore them. She understands that the media has distorted the information and given Muslims a very bad reputation. But in order to alleviate tensions, she speaks to other persons in Spanish, and they feel more comfortable. Lastly, she believes that wearing the hijab represents modesty and faith. She explained me, “if one had a diamond, one would protect it at all cost by covering it. If you do not cover it, it would probably be full of scratches.” In other words, she believes that the hijab helps her to protect her from being sexually harassed by men by desexualizing her body. She believes women should be only willing to show their body to their husband with whom they will spend the rest of their lives.<sup>107</sup>

Amanda Martínez wears the hijab in order to demonstrate her faith in Allah. When she was young, she did not wear it all the time, just in the mosque, but as she grew, she understood that it was a command from God. She felt the obligation, “I am a Muslim; therefore, I should use it.” But most importantly, it was her choice to wear it. However, she knows that when she goes to the public, her hijab is displaying her “Muslimness.” Unexpectedly, since she started to use it, she has felt that people have respected her more and not looked at her as a sexual object. She knows that the media and society hyper-sexualizes the Latina body. She recalls that before she

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<sup>106</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

began using the hijab, men would often make immoral comments about her body; but after she adopted the hijab, they did not do so anymore. The hijab is a tool that freed her from sexual harassment.<sup>108</sup>

In sum, most of the US Latinos who have converted into Islam have experienced a certain degree of disconnection or disillusionment with their old religion or have socially interacted with Muslims. Most of the Mexican-Americans in this study who have embraced Islam came from conservative families. The religious transition of these Latinos from Catholicism to Islam was facilitated by the similar beliefs that constitute these two faiths. For example, Muslims also believe in the eternal paradise, hell, angels, the judgment day, Jesus as a prophet, and the omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience of God.<sup>109</sup> Women embraced the hijab because it was a sign to show their religious devotion towards their faith, and because they considered it a powerful tool to combat sexual harassment.

The Latino Muslims who still practice some of their Mexican cultural customs tend to harmonize them with Islam. As they negotiate both cultural practices, which contain a different set of codes, norms, and rules, they create new grammatical rules, and therefore a new cultural language that gives them a new identity. The Latino Muslims who are not close to their ethnic roots tend to reinvent their Latinidad in order to harmonize their identity with Islam. These Latino Muslims do not continue to practice their family's ethnic customs simply because they consider themselves more as Americans than Mexicans. However, it is important to note that the cultural language Latino Muslims create is not limited solely to the harmonization of their ethnic customs with Islam, but by other codes such as food and language that together form this cultural language.

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<sup>108</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>109</sup> I. A. Ibrahim, *Una Breve Guía Ilustrada para entender el Islam*, 1-2 index.

## FOOD AND IDENTITY

Food has played an important cultural and social role since prehistoric times. The way a society consumes, serves, and makes its food, the tools it uses in cooking food, the expected behaviors of an individual while eating, the time one is allowed to eat, and society's rules regulating the consumption of certain ingredients are all norms that have been created to build social meaning. And although it is difficult for historians to determine during which period of history humanity attached social meaning to its food practices, it is safe to state that the transition of humankind from a simple state of nature where one ate to survive, into civilized societies where food preparation achieved artform, changed the concept of food.<sup>110</sup> Human beings began to give food a social meaning and create a cuisine that reflected the national, religious, and ethnic practices of their own society, and therefore transform the necessity of eating into a discourse that shed light on their cultural practices, values, and ideologies.<sup>111</sup> Because each culture is different, each societies' food choices tends to differ not only due to geography, but because each culture constructs their meals in compliance to their "set of codes, values, morals, and symbols," which give their society a *raison d'être*.<sup>112</sup>

As civilizations attached to their foodways a social meaning, the emergent civilizations produced a discourse on their food that reflected their cultural practices and ideologies. French linguist Roland Bathes argues that the social meaning that humans created on their food established a system of signs that together form a discourse. According to Barthes, food is a necessity that has always been attached to a structure of social communication. In other words, the act of eating food is an element that carries cultural symbolisms that communicates

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<sup>110</sup> Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture*, 9.

<sup>111</sup> Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture*, VIII.

<sup>112</sup> Alonso Benito, and Luis Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas. Una relectura de Roland Barthes," *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, [S.l.], v. 63, n. 40, p. 79-107, apr. (2005): 90, Available in: <http://revintsociologia.revistas.csic.es/index.php/revintsociologia/article/view/190>. Fecha de acceso: 14 nov. 2017 doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/ris.2005.i40.190>.

information. Such a communication system is composed of words, objects, aliments, and bodily gestures that together create complex grammatical rules. In this sense, one needs to see the ingredients as words that are being organized in a set of grammatical rules.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, identical to language, food sheds light on the traditional and cultural practices of societies.<sup>114</sup>

Therefore, as Barthes argues, modern societies no longer just eat food for nutrients, but rather create complex dishes that carry cultural symbolisms that carry a cultural, national, or religious discourse.<sup>115</sup> From the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes, I seek to analyze the cultural discourse of Islam and the Latino Muslims' Latinidad via their food to demonstrate how the Latino Muslims formulate their new identity through the food they eat. This discourse will show the harmonization of Muslim faith and Latino culture and bring to light the negotiation between the individual and his identity.

To understand the discourse that alimentary habits produce, one needs to, as Roland Barthes suggests, learn the components that forms society's cultural food discourse. We need to know how to understand the significance. Doing so can help researchers to understand the social life of the individual and his/her religious, moral, and ideological values.<sup>116</sup> These components manifest themselves in the form of rules that give food a social and cultural meaning. For example, some of these rules act as exclusionary norms, which prohibit or emphasize the risk of using certain ingredients; others act as rules of significant opposition, meaning that they show how a society labels food in dichotomies: sweet and savory, hot and cold, national and exotic; rules of association, either "simultaneous (plate) or successive (menu, or a diet)," which tend to organize meals in a logical order; and lastly there are the "rituals of use," which act as the

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<sup>113</sup> Benito and Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas," 89.

<sup>114</sup> Benito and Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas," 89.

<sup>115</sup> Benito and Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas," 90.

<sup>116</sup> Benito and Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas," 91.

principles that governs society's conception of the uses of food, functioning as an alimentary rhetoric. The alimentary habits of a society are delimited by rules that society prescribed to promote the dominant society's cultural behaviors.<sup>117</sup>

Before analyzing the cultural discourse of Latino Muslims in their food practices, it is important to highlight that every cultural dish has been created in relation to a national, regional, or religious structure.<sup>118</sup> In the case of the Latino Muslims, there are two cultural structures from which they renegotiate their *nouveau* self: the Mexican culture and Islam. Naturally, each of these structures built their foodways upon their own principles and values. Because these two structures conflict in several aspects, the new Latino converts have the option to reject one structure and adopt the other. However, as we will see, most of them chose to combine them and create a new cultural identity, which manifests itself through the food they eat.

In El Paso the majority of the Latino Muslims, most of them from a Mexican background, still continue to eat Mexican food. But what exactly is Mexican food? What kind of cultural discourse and symbols can one find in it? According to UNESCO the "traditional Mexican cuisine is a comprehensive cultural model comprised of farming, ritual practices, age-old skills, culinary techniques and ancestral community customs and manners."<sup>119</sup> Due to complexity, originality, and rich cultural history, the UNESCO listed it as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2010. The central ingredients in the Mexican cuisine are corn, beans, tomatoes, squashes, avocado, and chile.<sup>120</sup> Today, the Mexican traditional dishes vary from region to region, but they can nevertheless be found in every corner of Mexico. Some of the most

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<sup>117</sup> Benito and Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas," 91.

<sup>118</sup> Benito and Enrique, "Mitologías alimentarias cotidianas," 91.

<sup>119</sup> "Traditional Mexican cuisine - ancestral, ongoing community culture, the Michoacán paradigm," Last accessed December 1, 2016, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/traditional-mexican-cuisine-ancestral-ongoing-community-culture-the-michoacan-paradigm-00400>

<sup>120</sup> "Traditional Mexican cuisine - ancestral, ongoing community culture, the Michoacán paradigm."

popular dishes are *el pozole, los tacos, los tamales, el atole, el mole, las enchiladas, and las tortas*.<sup>121</sup> However, even though the main ingredients of the modern Mexican cuisine have existed for thousands of years in the territory that today is now considered Mexico, the alimentary discourse of the Mexican traditional food has fluctuated ever since the Mexican nation declared its independence from Spain.

The alimentary discourse of the Mexican cuisine originated during the Spanish conquest. During the first years of the conquest, the lack of European ingredients and food forced conquistadores to eat corn tortillas in order to survive. However, Spaniards abhorred the taste of corn in their palate. Spaniards such as Bernal Diaz del Castillo described corn as “misery of maize cakes.”<sup>122</sup> Consequently, the Spanish rejection of Indian ingredients and cultural dishes served to create a social distinction through food that separated the European from the Indian communities.

One culinary distinction that separated the Amerindians from the Spaniards was that for the latter, wine and wheat bread represented Christianity. They believed that during Mass the priests held divine powers that transformed wine and wheat bread into the body and blood of their savior. The Catholic Church declared that the Eucharist could not be celebrated with other drinks or grains because they did not have the necessary characteristics to transform into the body of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the consumption of wine and wheat bread represented the most important alimentary habit of their Christian identity.<sup>123</sup> In fact, the Spaniards created a myth around wine that contributed to its religious mystery. More than a drink, for the Spaniards, wine

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<sup>121</sup> “Gastronomía,” Sic México: Sistema de información cultural, accessed February 6, 2017, [http://sic.gob.mx/lista.php?table=gastronomia&estado\\_id=0&municipio\\_id=-1](http://sic.gob.mx/lista.php?table=gastronomia&estado_id=0&municipio_id=-1)

<sup>122</sup> Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales: Cuisine and the Formation of Mexican National Identity, 1821-1911." *The Americas* no. 2 (1996): 196.

<sup>123</sup> Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race, and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700* (Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2012), 57-58.

was a supernatural elixir capable of nourishing the human body and replenishing the blood that the body lost. Its medicinal benefits eliminated melancholy, gave courage to men, and purged yellow bile out of the body.<sup>124</sup>

On the other hand, the cultural dishes that indigenous societies ate bewildered the conquistadores and Christian authorities. The presence of insects, reptiles, spiders, dogs, mice, and worms in Indian dishes horrified the Spaniards, who were quick to condemn the dishes as uncivilized and unchristian. In European thought, the consumption of these animals was only permissible under extreme circumstances because Europeans linked insects and reptiles to decomposed or putrid objects. In addition, in Christianity, these creatures were associated with the Apocalypse. When the devil walked upon the earth, Christians believed, he took the shape of abominable creatures, such as insects or lizards, to terrify humanity.<sup>125</sup> But despite their misgivings, the Spaniards did experiment with the animals, fruits, and vegetables of the New World. Some new foods, like cacao, pineapples, maize, potatoes, and tomatoes pleased their palate. Nevertheless, Spaniards tried to avoid the foreign dishes because they feared consumption or the adoption of an Indian diet would make them sick or transform them into uncivilized beings: Natives.<sup>126</sup>

After Mexico won independence from Spain, the liberal governments sought to unify the national population by trying to integrate the Natives' past into the new Mexican nation, and therefore harmonize the European population with the Native. Ironically, as the Mexican state began to appropriate the Native's mythical past and use it as a foundation of their new national identity, the state excluded modernized Natives and presented them as "culturally backward and

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<sup>124</sup> Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador*, 56-57.

<sup>125</sup> Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador*, 119-120.

<sup>126</sup> Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador*, 146.

unfit for participation in civic life.”<sup>127</sup> Hence, if Natives sought to be accepted into Mexican society, they were required to abandon their indigenous culture and adopt a European lifestyle.<sup>128</sup> However, the creation of the Mexican national identity did not fall solely on the shoulders of the state since many Mexican intellectuals devoted themselves to the construction of a Mexican national identity.<sup>129</sup> In the process, they attempted to create a national cuisine with the purpose of fostering a national identity and unity. Not only should the Mexicans share the same language and history, they believed, “but also [eat] the same chiles and frijoles.”<sup>130</sup> Unfortunately for the Native cultures, the Mexican elite and intellectuals did not include them as members of their imaginary community. The elite were quick to reject indigenous food and associate it with the lower classes. As a result, indigenous dishes were removed from the national cuisine.<sup>131</sup>

The most important aspects of the modern Mexican cuisine were shaped by the Mexican revolution. But it is impossible to speak about the Mexican revolutionary movement without mentioning one of the most fearful generals of modern Mexico: General Díaz. The alimentary discourse of El Porfiriato demonstrates how the elite tried to project their culture through their alimentary practices. During the early twentieth-century, most elite Porfiristas assumed that indigenous food posed a threat to the well-being of the national society. For example, during the early 1900s Engineer Francisco Bulnes believed that the food of the Amerindians, including corn, caused the people who ate it to be backwards or uncivilized. In another instance culinary profiling, psychologist Julio Guerrero denounced the Indian food as a source of criminal behavior.<sup>132</sup> Because of the racial biases against the Natives and their traditional foods, the state

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<sup>127</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 200.

<sup>128</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 200.

<sup>129</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 201.

<sup>130</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 203.

<sup>131</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 214.

<sup>132</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 206.

rejected any dish that the lower classes and indigenous communities prepared and refused to include them in the national cuisine of Mexico.<sup>133</sup> Instead, the Porfiristas looked to France for inspiration. To incorporate the more civilized, aka European, dishes, the Mexican state promoted public cooking classes to teach students how to make the kind of dishes with the only ingredients acceptable to for the upper classes to consume. The classes presented its students European alimentary practices, emphasizing the French model. In the end, the government believed that these courses would improve society's moral behaviors while at the same time "cure" Mexico from its indigenous "backwardness."<sup>134</sup>

After the violent removal of Porfirio Díaz, revolutionary intellectuals envisioned a new society composed of liberal and westernized mestizos.<sup>135</sup> . During the 1920s and the early 1930s, the Mexican revolutionary state sought to promote the role of the mestizo in society with the purpose of creating a sense of national identity among the Mexican population. Instead of advocating the supremacy of the white men, liberals like José Vasconcelos sought to merge all the different racial communities of Mexico into a single new inclusive race. In Vasconcelo's mind, this new race would unify all the different racial communities of Mexico and mark the end of cultural and racial heterogeneity.<sup>136</sup> Naturally, liberal intellectuals sought to include the contributions of the indigenous community on the national imaginary, but only in the margins of "a larger mestizo national culture."<sup>137</sup>

During the rule of the subsequent revolutionary governments, the national cuisine reflected the state's idealization of the mestizo. Similar to the envisioned inclusive race, the

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<sup>133</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 207.

<sup>134</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 206-207.

<sup>135</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 194.

<sup>136</sup> Nancy L. Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*, (New York: Cornell University, 1991), 147.

<sup>137</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 194.

indigenous corn tamales and the European wheat bread joined together to form “an inclusive cuisine” that symbolized the national union of diverse racial communities into one. Ironically, even though the revolutionaries presented indigenous food, such as tamales, corn, and enchiladas, as the culinary manifestations of Mexican nationalism, they excluded the Amerindians from the national imagination.<sup>138</sup> Ultimately, these Europeanized indigenous dishes would form what is today’s modern traditional Mexican cuisine.

The Mexican alimentary discourse tells the story of a young state struggling to create a homogeneous national identity in Mexico. Through its food, the state and the intellectuals sought to create a national cuisine, and produce among its population patriotic feelings for Mexico. However, more than perpetuating and reproducing the cultural practices of the nation, the Mexican state sought to capitalize on mythical historical past of Mexico and persuade patrons that the Mexican cuisine is not only food, but the Mexican nation and culture served on a plate; they were successful as the thought of an enchilada, torta, taco, or burrito links the historical past of Mexico to its food.

Whereas the Mexican national cuisine revolved around the idea of national identity and unity, Islam’s food discourse focuses on strengthening the religious capital of its pious followers through nourishing their bodies. Although it would be erroneous and ludicrous to reduce the entire Muslim population’s religious cuisine into a homogenous entity, it is safe to state that there are certain laws in Islam that regulate the alimentary habits of Muslims. The dietary restrictions that Islam imposes on Muslims signify their dedication to the faith by adhering to dietary. Additionally, a common diet serves to create a sense of group identity and belonging.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales," 215.

<sup>139</sup> *Encyclopedia of Human Nutrition*. Ed. Benjamin Caballero, Lindsay Allen, and Andrew Prentice. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005: 93.

Acting as exclusionary norms, the Qu'ranic laws dictates to Muslims what ingredients should be allowed to enter into the human body. Naturally, many Muslims obey these laws because the Qu'ran expresses that by following them one could have a stronger relation with God. In fact, some of the dietary laws that Muslims practice come from the Jewish alimentary practices.<sup>140</sup> For example, some of the shared restrictions that both faiths practice, can be found in the Qu'ran: the Qu'ran states that God prohibited Muslims to consume blood, the meat of pigs, the meat of animals that had not been properly slaughtered by bleeding them out and without invoking the name of Allah during this act,<sup>141</sup> and ““the meat over which [a being] other than God has been invoked.””<sup>142</sup>

The consumption of alcoholic beverages is strictly prohibited in the Qu'ran. In Islam, Muslims are expected to avoid any beverage that might contain even a single drop of alcohol. Surprisingly, the religious discourse of alcohol in the Qu'ran is inconsistent. When using the word wine, the Qu'ran uses the Arabic word khamr. Such a word has a more profound meaning since it can also mean ““to cover,’ ‘to cause mental confusion’ or ‘to disturb the mind.’””<sup>143</sup> Although it would be logical to believe that the Qu'ran associates irrationality with wine, the interpretation of Qu'ranic texts that deal with alcohol have led some Islamic religious scholars to wonder if the Qu'ran prohibits Muslims to drink alcohol at all. This is because according to them, alcohol cannot be detrimental to the religious capital of Muslims if in some Qu'ranic verses alcohol is displayed as a reward for kindness.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011), 131.

<sup>141</sup> Roger Kershaw, "Faith, Fanaticism and Food in Islam," *Contemporary Review* no. 1632 (2002): 3, Literature Resource Center, EBSCOhost (accessed November 13, 2017).

<sup>142</sup> Freidenreich, *Foreigners and their Food*, 132.

<sup>143</sup> Laurence Michalak, and Trocki Karen, "Alcohol and Islam: An Overview," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 33, no. 4 (2006): 528.

<sup>144</sup> Michalak and Trocki, "Alcohol and Islam: An Overview," 528.

On the other hand, Mohamed's oral history, also known as the Hadiths, and his behavior towards wine reinforces the idea of alcohol as an intoxicant beverage.<sup>145</sup> However, the prohibition of alcohol in Islam was not enforced during the early years of the Prophet's spiritual experience with Allah. At first, Muslims tolerated the consumption of alcohol because even if bad deeds could emerge from drinking it, there was not a reason to absolutely condemn them. But problems emerged when some Muslims gathered together with Mohamed to pray under the influence of alcohol. The irreverent results of their blasphemy forced Muslim authorities to exclude any intoxicated individual from their collective prayers. Ultimately, the Prophet himself condemned alcohol, implying that any Muslim who dared to touch an alcoholic beverage with his lips was committing a grave sin.<sup>146</sup>

In summary, the Muslim alimentary discourse exemplifies the cultural religious practices of Muslims and puts them into effect in the food that they eat. The Islamic dietary restrictions aim to stimulate the individual to practice the religious doctrine of Islam through body practices (eating, fasting), regardless of the culture (since as Christianity, culture tends to be embedded with religion) to which the individual belongs. But what does it mean to have both alimentary discourses into a single meal?

As Latinos from El Paso adopt Islam as their new religion, they embrace new religious alimentary habits and rules that change not only the ingredients they eat, but also the way how they perceive themselves: a Muslim. After becoming Muslim, their Latino ethnic identity did not disappear. On the contrary, they welcomed the cultural practices of their new faith and negotiated them with their Latino identity until a new coherent cultural language was formed. One can see the negotiation of identity in their cuisine. The constant negotiation of what is to be

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<sup>145</sup> Michalak and Trocki, "Alcohol and Islam: An Overview," 529-530.

<sup>146</sup> Michalak and Trocki, "Alcohol and Islam: An Overview," 531.

Latino and what is to be Muslim is found in the ingredients they use to cook and the dishes they choose to eat. Latino Muslims attempt to merge their Mexican identity with Islam in their food represents one of the three characteristics ( the other two being customs and language) that contribute to the creation of their new cultural language.

Although the majority of Latino Muslims who participated in this study do not practice any Mexican cultural or national custom, most of them continue to eat Mexican food at home. They eat traditional dishes because they have accepted their Mexican national identity through the food they eat, reinforcing their ethnic identity in their daily meals even if they do not feel a strong connection to Mexico. For example, Amanda Martínez, a third generation Mexican-American who has never set a foot in Mexico, mentions that she sees herself as a Hispanic with Mexican roots because she connects her Latinidad and Mexican identity to her family, the Spanish language, and the food she and her family eat. Because of her roots, it is very common for her to cook Mexican dishes at home such as tacos, flautas, enchiladas, chile relleno, tamales, menudo, tripietas, barbacoa, ceviche, tapioca, tres leches cake, and mole. In order to consume the Mexican cultural dishes that traditionally have pork, she replaces the pork with other ingredients. For example, instead of using pork for the tamales, menudo, and pozole, she uses chicken.<sup>147</sup> In another example, after Flor Lozano became a Muslim, she continued to prepare Mexican cultural dishes. At home, she cooks rice with tomato, tacos de frijoles, tamales, burritos, quesadillas, and uses tortilla in almost all of her meals. She does not only consume these delicious dishes for her own pleasure, but principally because she is proud of her Mexican culture and heritage and celebrates them through the food she eats.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>148</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

But eating Mexican food after conversion poses several problems to the alimentary habits of Latino Muslims. Islam imposes on Muslims dietary restrictions that seek to promote the religious faith through bodily practices by prohibiting the consumption of certain ingredients such as pork. Hence, Latino Muslims who eat Mexican food face the challenge of constantly avoiding pork in order to show their devotion to Allah. Joshua Carrasco, a Mexican American who has recently become a Muslim (one month), told me how much he yearns for Mexican dishes that have pork. For him, it was painful to stop eating Mexican dishes such as chicharrón and tacos de tripa and buche. He loved them so much he ate them at least once or twice per week, Joshua told me with tears on his eyes. He tries at all cost to take pork out of his diet. But unfortunately, social events make this task difficult. For example, in family gatherings, his relatives like to cook dishes with pork. In one instance, when Joshua attended a family party, one of his relatives offered him a dish. Joshua ate it because he was hungry, but later panicked when his wife told him that the dish he was eating, discada, a Mexican plate prepared with sausages and beef, contained pork. At that moment, he appreciated that his wife, a Mexican Christian, supported his religious beliefs because she helped him to follow one of Allah's commands. On the other hand, he also realized that he failed Allah by consuming pork, so he asked for forgiveness. For Joshua, adapting his diet to Islam has been one of the most difficult parts of being a Muslim. But even though he misses pork, in the end he knows that he will be spiritually rewarded by Allah.<sup>149</sup>

To cope with dietary challenges, instead of eliminating the Mexican cultural dishes that have pork as their main ingredient, Latino Muslims substitute it with halal (food that adheres to Islamic law), creating a new culinary discourse that leads to the creation of a cultural language that seeks to harmonize the negotiation of their Latino and Muslim identity. For example, due to

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<sup>149</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

her previous culture, Flor struggled to stop eating dishes that contain pork as its main ingredient. In order to make them acceptable to consume under Islamic law, she substituted the halal instead of pork. Instead of preparing the tamales with pork, she uses chicken or beef. During family gatherings, one would expect that family tensions would appear because the family would see Flor's religious rejection of pork as an attack to her Latino identity. But instead, Flor's family embraced the Flor's new cultural language. If it is not possible to have halal for everyone, the family focuses on preparing special halal dishes for Flor to make her feel part of the family.<sup>150</sup>

Interestingly, the path that has led Latino Muslims to harmonize their Mexican food with Islam has also stimulated them to adopt Mediterranean or Arabian food. Some of the factors that led them to adopt this type of cuisine are intermarriage, diverse friends, and because Latino Muslims find that Mediterranean food is healthier and easier to consume because it adheres more naturally to Islam's alimentary rules. For example, when I asked Flor which dishes she tended to eat the most at home, Flor stated that she prepares dishes mostly from Arabian cuisine because her husband was born and raised in Bahrain, an Arabian Island situated in the Persian Gulf. However, she uses some Mexican ingredients to complement her Arabian dishes because she prefers their flavor. She uses Mexican comino, chile mexicano (pimiento), jalapeño, and chipotle.<sup>151</sup>

Alma Cruz, a Mexican American who has spent most of her life living in Mexico, cooks Iranian and Mexican cultural dishes at home. After she married her Iranian fiancé, she started to learn to cook Iranian dishes. She found Iranian recipes on the internet and some of her Iranian friends taught her how to cook them. Since her husband is not involved in the cooking, she has had the task of combining both cultural cuisines at home. The dishes she prepares are chicken in

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<sup>150</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>151</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

achiote with Iranian rice and pescado al mojo de ajo with Iranian rice. Sometimes she just prepares Mexican food; the meals she makes are tacos, enchiladas, mole, tamales de cazuela, chilaquiles, and chiles rellenos. Additionally, even though she does not celebrate Christmas, as a proud Mexican she continues the tradition of preparing turkey, tamales, mashed potatoes, and fruit punch in December.<sup>152</sup>

Latinos who adopt Islam find ways to negotiate the dietary laws with their traditional culture; Latino Muslims who have been raised in a Latino Muslim family consume their family's hybrid cuisine and normalize it. Kathy Cruz, daughter of Alma, enjoys eating her mom's hybrid dishes. However, she tends to eat more Iranian food at home because she perceives it as being healthier than Mexican food. She believes that the Iranian cuisine has a better balance of grains, vegetables, and meat. Kathy contrasts the Iranian diet with Mexican food which is greasier and composed of dishes that rely heavily on red meat. One of the Iranian dishes that her mom prepares is Loobia polo, a dish composed of rice, vegetables, and beef; she also makes kebab with rice, and for dessert a coconut yogurt with cucumber and mint. A dinner time staple, her mom prepares a combination of rice with stew (chicken, beef, eggplant) with vegetables and beans.<sup>153</sup>

At home Amanda prepares two different cultural cuisines: Mexican and Moroccan. Since I already mentioned the Mexican dishes she eats, I will now focus on the Moroccan dishes she makes. The reason why she prepares Moroccan dishes is because her husband was born in that country. She learned to cook Moroccan food by interacting with her mother-in-law and from her Moroccan friends from the mosque. When she cooks this food, she usually cooks meat and mixes it with dried food. One of the dishes she cooks the most is called la-hamarqooq. This dish

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<sup>152</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>153</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

consists on lamb or beef with sweet prunes. Interestingly, when she cooks Mexican or Moroccan dishes, she usually complements them with tortillas and chile. She stated that she likes to put chile in everything, even in the Moroccan food she cooks.<sup>154</sup>

In this case, it is worth mentioning that Islam changed the notions of masculinity and femininity when Amanda Martínez's family chose to adopt Islam as their new faith. Amanda saw that Islam changed the macho ideals of his father. Before Islam, he used to believe that women needed to be the only ones dealing with the hard tasks of domestic labor. Islam, according to Amanda, promotes the idea that men and women should both share equally domestic labor. Even though culturally men are considered the financial providers and women the caregivers and guardians of the house, Amanda commented, Islam changed his dad's ideals of what it means to be a man. After conversion, his dad felt an obligation to help more in the house and in the kitchen.<sup>155</sup> However, it is important to point out that in not all cases conversion to Islam eliminates in men their machista behaviors and beliefs. Amanda's experience would naturally differ from other's.

Although Omar Hernández does not cook too much at home, his wife, an Anglo American, cooks dishes from diverse cultural cuisines: Mediterranean, American, and Mexican. When she prepares Mexican dishes, she gets rid of the pork and replaces them with halal ingredients. Luckily for his wife, Omar's mother is also a Latino Muslim who taught her to cook Mexican dishes already harmonized with Islam, without lard and pork. Moreover, his wife cooks Middle Eastern dishes, thanks to the aid of her friends at the mosque. She was taught to cook

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<sup>154</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>155</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

dishes from Jordan, Palestine, India, and Thailand. Lastly, raised as an American, she cooks American food at home such as hamburgers, spaghetti, and sometimes pizza.<sup>156</sup>

Since Joshua Carrasco lives in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and has a Mexican wife, he eats many Mexican cultural dishes. His wife cooks him mole, enchiladas, frijoles, quesadillas, and tacos, cooking everything with halal ingredients. For complicated dishes like menudo, Joshua family members help him out. His brother prepares a vegan menudo that tastes almost identical to the Mexican menudo. Naturally, after conversion, he had to give up several Mexican pork dishes. But interestingly, he is seeking to adopt, in the near future, a new cultural cuisine. Now that he identifies himself as a Muslim, Joshua is planning to eat Arabian food because he sees it healthier than Mexican food.<sup>157</sup> Since he is a recent convert, one can study his transitions to learn how Latino Muslims are slowly adopting new cultural practices that are alien to their Mexican identity. Eventually, like other Latino Muslims, he will negotiate his Latino and Muslim identity until a new cultural language forms.

Tortillas continue to be an important staple in Latino Muslims' meals, but as any other food that traditionally contains pork, Latino Muslims struggle to find restaurants or *tortillerías* that produce pork-free tortillas. For example, Latino Muslims like Amanda, who eat at tortillas at least four times a week buy American tortillas that are made with vegetable shortening.<sup>158</sup> If Latino Muslims are served tortillas outside of their home, they will only consume them if they do not contain lard. When Omar Hernández eats tortillas outside home, he only eats them if the restaurants or stores offer a vegetable option.<sup>159</sup> But in Ciudad Juárez, where the custom is to

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<sup>156</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>157</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>158</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>159</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

produce tortillas with lard, this task is more difficult. Usually, Joshua must visit one tortillería after another tortillería, searching for tortillas made with vegetable shortening.<sup>160</sup>

When Latino Muslims lack the time to prepare their own meals, they resort to cooks, restaurants, and relatives. For example, Kathy Cruz's family asks a lady in Juarez to prepare tamales with halal meat (chicken). When they order pizza from restaurants, they order vegetarian pizza or ask the restaurant to replace pepperoni with bacon or pepperoni made of turkey. In some cases, they order cheese pizza with no other ingredients so they can create their own pizza with their own halal ingredients.<sup>161</sup> Others eat Mexican halal food at their relatives' homes. When Omar Hernández visits her mother, she makes tamales and gorditas, replacing the undesired ingredients for beef or chicken. Moreover, the tortillas she serves do not have lard. They instead opt for tortillas made with vegetable shortening. For menudo, he only eats at his uncle's house. This is because he knows how to make it without pork.<sup>162</sup>

On the other hand, Latino Muslims that are not close to their ethnic roots, national identity, and even their family's cultural practices tend to display their cultural disconnection through the meals they cook at home. Since these Latino Muslims do not have a strong feeling of being Mexican, Arab, or American, they do not follow a specific national cuisine. For example, the dishes Vilma Luna, a Mexican-American who hardly feels Mexican, cooks at home rotate different national cuisines or are so simple that it is difficult to associate them to a specific national cuisine. At home Vilma eats rice with lemon (Mediterranean), rice with butter and celery (Mediterranean), red rice (Mexican), lentils soup (Mexican), fresh sardines, tuna, salads, sandwiches, and wings with honey or buffalo (American).<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>161</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>162</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>163</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

Another reason that Latino Muslims disentangle themselves from any traditional cultural practice is the practice of Shia Islam. Since the Mexican cultural dishes have a strong and historical connection with Mexican culture, there are some members of the Shia Muslim community who feel that they must separate themselves from culture to feel closer to God. For example, Daniel says that he is not into culture. In other words, he is not interested in following any national or ethnic cultural practice. For this reason, he does not prepare Mexican food. Naturally, as a Shia Muslim he seeks to avoid intermingling culture with faith by cooking simple dishes, which he knows that are good for the body and do not pose a conflict with Islam. For the most part, he and his son try to eat in the simplest way possible; they eat diet eggs, fruits, beans, rice, vegetables, and milk. These ingredients by themselves are not related to any cultural community or practice, allowing Daniel to consume them without the risk including culture in his daily life. However, since El Paso, Texas, has a strong Mexican community, which derives from its close proximity to Mexico, Daniel sometimes eats some Mexican staples like tortillas and buys menudo and burritos from the food trucks.<sup>164</sup> Ricardo, his son, also tries to avoid cultural food since he follows the footsteps of his father. Therefore, instead of seeing food as a luxury, he sees it as a necessity; necessities that give him energy and keep his body in good condition.<sup>165</sup>

Nevertheless, even if Latino Muslims do not practice their ethnic cultural customs, family plays an important role in maintaining the Mexican culture alive in their lives through cooking. Even though Ricardo's home-cooked food appears to be monotonous, he does visit his grandmother regularly to eat Mexican food. She prepares enchiladas, chiles rellenos, chilaquiles,

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<sup>164</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>165</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

and enchiladas.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, the only way Vilma Luna eats Mexican food is if she eats at her mom's house. Usually, her mom makes pollo en mole, chiles rellenos, tacos, enchiladas, and quesadillas. Knowing that her daughter is a Muslim, Vilma's mother adapted her cuisine to Islam's dietary rules. Her mother stopped using lard in her cooking when Vilma eats at her home and avoids buying ingredients that due to religious rules, Vilma cannot consume. Indirectly, Vilma's cultural language changes the culinary discourse of her mother's Mexican cuisine when Vilma is present in the house. However, since several Mexican cultural dishes are difficult to make halal, in this case menudo, her mother simply does not invite Vilma to eat. This is done in order to eliminate any family tensions between them. Instead, Vilma spends most of her time outside her mom's sphere of influence. Since she volunteers in the mosque, she passes most of her day with other female Muslims. They eat together and cook together. The dishes they prepare are from the Mediterranean cuisine.<sup>167</sup> Even if Latino Muslims do not practice any Mexican customs, they would nonetheless experience their Mexican cultural identity through their family, who reinforce it through food.

Although Mexican culture is known for drinking strong tequilas and cervezas, some of the Latino Muslims have declared that for the most part it was easy to leave alcohol out of their lives. For example, since Alma did not drink alcohol prior to her conversion, she was able to easily leave it out of her life.<sup>168</sup> Flor disliked the taste alcohol and therefore stopped drinking even before she became a Muslim.<sup>169</sup> Omar Hernández recalled that before his family became Muslim, they were big drinkers. Although this happened when he was a child, he says that is was

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<sup>166</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>167</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

<sup>168</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>169</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 18, 2016.

relatively easy for them to stop drinking.<sup>170</sup> Joshua Carrasco told me that he liked to drink alcohol in social events. However, after he became a Muslim he stopped drinking. Sometimes his friends would offer him alcohol, but he politely refuses. His friends' reactions surprised him because they did not treat Joshua differently. Joshua realized that his friends respected him. "Maybe Allah illuminated them," Joshua surmised.<sup>171</sup> For Daniel faith was the main reason to stop drinking it. He says that the Qu'ran helped him live a better life by inducing him to abandon alcohol.<sup>172</sup> Before his conversion, he was a heavy drinker but after reading some passages from the Qu'ran, he stopped drinking: "O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination- of Satan's handiwork; eschew such (abomination), that you may prosper."<sup>173</sup>

Even though food can be considered trivial or mundane, most societies base their collective identity, in part, on their traditional food. The complexity of society's cultural, religious, or even national dishes is not the mere result of innocuous societal decisions to nourish bodies, but reproduce cultural practices, ideologies and customs, all served for dinner. The cultural discourse in the alimentary habits of society is not found in the ingredients per se, but in their combination, preparation, or absence, which produce a new sensation of flavors and scents that not only pleases the palate but also feeds the mind with cultural symbols.

The Latino Muslim cuisine is one of three codes (customs, language, food) that form their new cultural language. Those who chose to continue eating Mexican food after conversion changed their cooking habits to fulfill the religious rules of Islam. In this sense, the Latino Muslim cuisine is the negotiation of two distinct cultural languages that were constantly

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<sup>170</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>172</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>173</sup> Qu'ran chapter five verse ninety.

negotiated until they formed a new cuisine that adapted to respect the codes, values, morals, and cultural symbols of both their faith and Latin identity. As Latino Muslims substitute ingredients in their Mexican food to harmonize it with Islam, they create a new culinary code that demonstrates the reproduction of their Mexican identity and their willingness to show their devotion towards Islam through bodily practices.

Latino Muslims have the decision to choose which ingredients and cultural dishes they want to reproduce in their daily life and to what extent. Instead of rejecting their Mexican national identity, they embrace and merge it with Islam, harmonizing two different cultural identities. The Muslims who chose to practice their Islam faith along with their Mexican culture create a new cultural language in their food. This language demonstrates that even though Latino Muslims do not celebrate the Mexican nation to exemplify their national identity, they can maintain their Latino identity, along with its mythical historical past, alive through their food while at the same time embody their faith by substituting haram food (prohibited ingredients) for halal (food that adheres to Islamic Law).

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

In this chapter, I aim to understand how Latino Muslims use their ethnic cultural language to redefine their identity. As this chapter will show, all the Latino Muslims interviewed in this study use the Spanish language to identify themselves as Latinos, implying that their language is one of the most crucial identity elements that Latinos possess. But after conversion, the adoption of new codes such as the Arabic language creates an identity crisis that pushes some Latino Muslims to question who they are. The solution is simple to the Latino Muslims who are close their ethnic cultural practices. Since their identity is strongly associated with their Mexican cultural practices, the Spanish language permits them to see themselves as Latinos who belong to the Mexican culture. On the other hand, the Latino Muslims who are distant from their ethnic cultural practices struggle to understand their new identity. The lack of a sense of belonging to any culture creates an identity crisis that forces these Latino Muslims to reimagine their place in society. The constant negotiation of what it means to be a Latino and a Muslim makes them redefine their identity until a new cultural language surfaces. As a result, they have associated their identity with the Moors, a medieval Muslim civilization that ruled over the Iberian Peninsula. In both Latino groups, the Spanish language is a code that does not disappear after conversion because Latino Muslims have seen their ethnic cultural language as the core of their Latinidad. How can someone be Latino if he/she cannot speak Spanish? However, the loss of the Spanish language is noticeable as generations pass by since in the United States the English language has carried a stronger social and symbolic capital than the Spanish language. The Spanish language is a code that is so ingrained in the identity of the Latino community that it cannot be replaced or destroyed by another code such as Arabic or Arabic. The only way this code may be eliminated, is when the individual chooses to destroy his Latino identity by distancing from his/hers ethnic cultural attributes or the American state forces the individual to

destroy his former self through Americanization by inserting a chauvinistic mentality in Latino`s mind.

Language is not the result of random noises and sounds, but rather a system of communication that human beings produced to transmit their needs, want, feelings, and ideas to another human being. Be it written, spoken, or gestured, language permits humanity to understand the world, organize it, and create meaning around it. Language is the tool through which humans shape and are shaped by their environment, the medium through which meaning is assigned, and the means by which people create social connections and individual identities via myths, culture, and religion.<sup>174</sup>

As modern nations rose, the dominant societies imposed their culture on the rest of the population, seeking to unify millions of individuals under one same flag, mythical past, and language. But as Saussure, a Swedish linguist, posits, space does not define a language. It is language which defines space. In his eyes, dialects and languages do not have natural barriers or limitations.<sup>175</sup> This limitless nature explains the individual`s will to fight in order to maintain his/her language in a space where the dominant society seeks to suffocate it. Marginalized subjects adjust their identity to acquiesce to the dominant power, but still conserve part of their roots. Language preserves an individual`s identity and serves as a tool to mark the boundaries of cultural spaces. In some cases, language generates a cultural discourse that seeks to legitimize marginalized communities and seeks recognition by the dominant society.

For most of the Latino Muslims interviewed in this study, the Spanish language represents their identity and their ethnic background. Flor speaks English, Spanish, and some

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<sup>174</sup> David Evans, *Language and Identity: Discourse in the World* (London; New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 3.

<sup>175</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *¿Qué significa hablar?: Economía de los intercambios lingüísticos* (Madrid; Spain: Ediciones Akal S.A., 1999), 117-119.

Arabic. Before coming to El Paso, Flor believed that Spanish was not important since she only spoke English and Arabic with her husband, but because they live at El Paso, she uses more Spanish. Consequently, Flor tries to teach Spanish to her children. One of her sons is able to speak it while the other one can only understand it. Even though speaking the Spanish language has not been emphasized in her family, for Flor, the Spanish language represents her roots and identity.<sup>176</sup>

The presence of three different cultural languages (Mexican culture, Islam, American culture) situates Latino Muslims a cultural paradox that complicates the way they see themselves: am I Mexican, American, or Arab? Who am I? As a result, they connect their identity to their native language in order to solve their identity crisis. Alma speaks Spanish, English, and a little bit of Farsi. She uses Spanish mostly in the house and with her friends. For Alma, the Spanish language is very important, so much so that she taught her children how to speak or at least understand it. Even though she speaks some English, she feels better speaking Spanish. Because of her attachment to the language, her husband learned Spanish. As a Mexican who embraced Islam, Alma feels her cultural conflict is that she does not identify as Mexican, Iranian, or American. In order to resolve this conflict, she made her native language a large part of her identity. Today she considers herself a Latina Muslim.<sup>177</sup>

Even though Kathy speaks three languages, she links her identity to the language she feels more connected: the Spanish language. She speaks English, a little bit of Farsi, Arabic, and Spanish. At home she speaks Spanish because her mother and father are more accustomed to speaking it. In fact, because Kathy's mother does not speak too much English, Kathy's husband learned Spanish in order to connect with her mother. Kathy speaks fluent Spanish, but living in

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<sup>176</sup> Flor Lozano, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 18, 2016.

<sup>177</sup> Alma Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 18, 2016.

the United States for most of her life has altered the way she speaks it. She is sometimes forced to substitute Spanish words for their English counterparts. Because Kathy lives in El Paso, a city where the majority of the population speaks Spanish, she feels the necessity of improving her ability to communicate in her native tongue. Finally, she sees herself as a Latina because she spent her childhood in Ciudad Juárez, and because her mother is from Mexican origin, and speaks Spanish very well. In fact, because Kathy speaks Spanish that she feels more Mexican than American. On the other hand, not knowing Farsi makes her feel less Iranian.<sup>178</sup>

But even if they speak Spanish and live in Mexico, using the Spanish language to communicate with others does not make a person de facto Mexican. It is not even their Mexican way of life, but their Latinidad that connects them to other Mexicans and Latinos. Joshua Carrasco speaks Spanish, English, and some Arabic. Since Joshua lives in Juárez, he speaks Spanish at home, with his family, and every time he is in the public sphere. For Joshua, the Spanish language is important for his life; he barely learned it twenty years ago. He does not only communicate with his family in Spanish, but he also works as a manager in a sales store that daily serves Mexican-American and Mexican customers. Joshua considers himself a Latino Muslims because he has sangre Latina, practices Islam, and speaks Spanish. Moreover, since he was a little child his parents taught him to be “Mexican” and to be “careful” with white Americans. They warned him against the prejudice and racism of the white people. “Tú eres mexicano. Los hueros no nos quieren. Perdónalos pero no vivas con eso,” said Joshua’s parents to him. Surprisingly, even though he has lived in Mexico for the last seven years, celebrates Mexico’s traditions and customs, was raised as a Mexican, and speaks Spanish, he feels that he is living in the middle of two different worlds. “Últimamente soy gringo,” Joshua told me.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>179</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

Not all the Latino Muslims had the opportunity to learn Spanish. Modern societies carry in their language a social and symbolical capital that gives it an economic value. In other words, the language of the dominant society is valued more than other languages. As a result, some Latino Muslims do not learn the Spanish language when they are young because their parents value more the English language, or the state's institutions discourages the use of Spanish. Omar Hernandez speaks English, some Spanish, and Arabic. When he was young he did not learn how to speak Spanish. As a matter of fact, speaking Spanish was against his mother's rules. The school district where Omar studied told her mother that she should not teach Spanish to Omar; teaching Spanish would be only detrimental to Omar's academic performance.<sup>180</sup>

The state's institutions discouraged one of the most important cultural aspects a Latino has: his ethnic language. Thanks to his educators' efforts, Omar formed the idea that the Spanish language was not important. "Maybe [Spanish would be important] if I could go back in time," Omar whispered. But interestingly, Omar believes that Spanish is a beautiful language because some Spanish words come from Arabic. He relates the history of a time when the Spaniards and Moors cohabitated in the same social space and that the influences are still seen in the language. Omar explained me that although the Spanish Reconquista expelled the moors from the Iberian Peninsula and used the inquisition to take the Muslims' land, the Moors' legacy did not die. The cultural influence is still present in the Spanish language, Omar continued. According to Omar, the Spaniards adopted some Arabs words into their own language. For example, he mentions that *ojalá* comes from Arabic, and that it means god willing. Although a Mexican-American descendant Omar does not consider himself Mexican, principally because he does not speak a fluent Spanish. For him, the Spanish language represents another society, basically another culture: Hispanics. "Only true Mexicans live in Mexico," Omar commented. Nevertheless, he

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<sup>180</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

sees himself as a Latino Muslim. His Latinidad comes from his Mexican ethnic roots, culture, and the Spanish language. And his “Muslimness” comes from worshipping Allah.<sup>181</sup>

Similarly, Amanda Martínez did not learn to speak Spanish because her school district promoted the idea that Hispanic parents should not teach their children the Spanish language. The school authorities advised Amanda’s parents to not teach Spanish to Amanda. They warned her parents that if Amanda learned Spanish, her academic performance would be poor. Thus, her parents made the difficult decision of suppressing their native tongue in front of Amanda. But Amanda remembers that she was not the only one. She remembered that many of her Latino friends did not learn the Spanish language for the same reason. Moreover, Amanda remembers that when she was in elementary school, the school separated the children in two groups: the ones who spoke Spanish and the ones who spoke English. Amanda explained me that the children who spoke Spanish were segregated from the rest of the other students. She felt that being in that class was a form of punishment for not learning English. Consciously or unconsciously, the school authorities sought to eliminate the Spanish language. Later in her life, Amanda learned to speak Spanish, but wishes that she could speak it better because the Spanish language, along with her Mexican culture and roots, is a reminder of her ethnic roots and identity. Not being able to do so makes her feel ashamed. Nevertheless, Amanda believes that you are a Muslim before being a Mexican.<sup>182</sup>

On the other hand, the Latino Muslims who are not close to their ethnic cultural practices believe that the Spanish language is the epicenter of their identity. Although Daniel and Ricardo do not practice any ethnic cultural practices, the Spanish language influences who they are. Daniel speaks two languages: English and Spanish. He only uses Spanish at work and with his

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<sup>181</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>182</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

family; however, he does not use it too much at home or with his son. Although Daniel considers Spanish a beautiful language and would like for his son to read and speak it more, for Daniel Spanish is not very important since he lives in the United States. For this reason, he prefers that his son speaks proper English. Nevertheless, Daniel's father taught him to use proper Spanish and avoid at all cost slang, Spanglish, or other types of improper use. According to Daniel, a Latino should speak a proper Spanish. In other words, he should respect his ethnic roots and remember where he is from.<sup>183</sup> Daniel's son, Ricardo is able to speak English, some Spanish (he is not capable of maintaining an extended conversation), some Arabic, and some Farsi words. He usually uses Spanish in public or with his family. Even though his father has preferred to teach him more English than Spanish, Ricardo would like to teach Spanish to his future sons because he considers it valuable. For Ricardo, the Spanish language is his identity, and it represents a connection with other Hispanics.<sup>184</sup>

However, as Latinos adopt Islam, they are forced to learn the Arabic language because Muslims believe that the Qu'ran's verses are sacred. Since Mohamed wrote the Qu'ran under God's divine influence, Muslims consider the verses of the Qu'ran as the literal words of God. Therefore, they think that if one translates the Qu'ran into another language, it would distort God's words.<sup>185</sup> For this reason, many Latino Muslims commit themselves to learning Arabic instead of reading the Qu'ran in English or even Spanish. Omar Hernandez believes Arabic is an important language because it brings him closer to God. For him, reading the Qu'ran in Arabic is essential because he is afraid of losing the verses' meaning if he reads it in another language. "It would probably be lost in the translation," Omar commented. For this same reason, he prays in

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<sup>183</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>184</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>185</sup> Michalak and Trocki, "Alcohol and Islam: An Overview," 527-528.

Arabic. However, since he is still learning the language, he sometimes reads the Qu'ran in English.<sup>186</sup>

As a convert of only a few weeks, Joshua has been trying to learn Arabic to read the Qu'ran and feel a closer relation to God. Although he reads the Qu'ran in Arabic, for the most part he does not understand it and is forced to pick up a translation in English to understand the verses he is reading. In the mosque, Daniel reports that the Imam tends to read passages in Arabic or change from English to Arabic when he speaks. During these moments, Daniel struggles to comprehend the significance of the Imam's discourse.<sup>187</sup> Meanwhile, Amanda reads the Qu'ran in English in order to understand the meaning of the passages, but prays in Arabic. Even though she does not speak Arabic, she memorized the verses to rehearse them as she prays.<sup>188</sup> Lastly, Kathy has been learning Arabic to comprehend what she is saying in her prayers. In this way, she can connect more to God. She reads the Qu'ran in English and Spanish and prays in Arabic, English, and Spanish.<sup>189</sup>

As Latino Muslims learn Arabic, the strong association that the Arabic language has to the Arabic culture drives Latino Muslims to explore this culture. Driven by curiosity, Amanda found some similarities between Islam and her Latino culture. She believes that both cultures are machistas because they represent men as the family's breadwinners and women as nurturers, mothers, and wives. Moreover, she found that both cultures are conservative since they both cover the body of women. When Amanda was a child, she remembers that even before her grandmother became a Muslim, she used to cover her hair and dress modestly.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>187</sup> Joshua Carrasco, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 29, 2017.

<sup>188</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>189</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>190</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

Additionally, it is important to point out that when Latino Muslims go the mosque or other religious spaces to pray, they find different cultural groups praying under the same roof. Most of the Latino Muslims at El Paso have told me that the Islamic Center and the Al-Mahdi Center try to integrate all of their members into their community, leaving behind culture, nationalities, and race. However, not every Muslim religious space offers its members this same experience. When Amanda Martínez used to live in San Antonio, she felt that the Muslim community was more divided by culture and nationalities. She felt that although those communities shared the same religious space to pray, in the end they segregated themselves in cultural groups. It was difficult for her to relate to other groups because there were not many Mexican Americans.<sup>191</sup>

In situations like Amanda's, it is natural for Latino Muslims to seek a group that share the same cultural language as theirs. Although it is not the scope of this thesis to talk about Latino Muslim institutions, it is worth mentioning one of them. Naturally, as Latino Muslims find other individuals who share a similar cultural language, they tend to organize themselves and form institutions (Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO)) that seek to show the presence of Latino Muslims in the United States and initiate a discourse about their own community. It is essential for LADO to initiate a discourse about their own community because according to Pierre Bourdieu, societies use discourse to be recognized by the dominant society. For cultural groups like LADO, the creation of their own discourse is the difference between existing and not existing in society. In order to exist, they must be recognized by the dominant society as a community with cultural and social capital.<sup>192</sup> However, discourse can be a double edge sword. As the community seeks to be acknowledged by the dominant society, there is a risk of being

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<sup>191</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

<sup>192</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *¿Qué significa hablar?: Economía de los intercambios lingüísticos*, 21.

marginalized by the latter because it perceives them as a cultural and social threat. In the eyes of the dominant society, being different to them is a social threat.<sup>193</sup>

Lastly, it is very important to point out that their adoption of a new cultural language, in this case Islam, motivated some Latino Muslims to liberate themselves from the dominant society's oppression and to explore new opportunities.<sup>194</sup> Martínez-Vázquez mentions that we live in a colonial imaginary where ““a framework, a set of ideological strategies of containment by which everything is explained and organized, ensuring thereby the consensus of the dominated and their consent to their domination.””<sup>195</sup> , I want to argue that some Latino Muslims used their Muslim identity as a decolonization tool to help them overcome their social inferiority. When Omar Hernández was in school he believed that the white men were dominant and superior to other communities because his teachers always taught him how the western civilizations conquered other civilizations and triumphed over them; he read about Americans annexing Texas and U.S. soldiers marching in Mexico City, almost as if the west was destined to rule over all other societies. But when he became Muslim, Omar learned that the Moors, a non-western civilization, were great conquerors and a powerful civilization who conquered more than half of Spain, threatening the existence of the west. In that moment of study, he understood that the white western civilization did not have a monopoly of power and knowledge. Instead, he realized that historical moments were left out of history purposely, the dominate narrative selectively presented by those that it kept in power<sup>196</sup> Omar used his Muslim identity to decolonize his thoughts and to legitimize himself as an individual with capital.

## **Moorish Spain**

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<sup>193</sup> “Discurso poder y discriminación,” Cátedra Unesco, Last accessed October 5, 2017, [http://www.geocities.ws/estudiscurso/vandijk\\_dpd.html](http://www.geocities.ws/estudiscurso/vandijk_dpd.html)

<sup>194</sup> Evans, *Language and Identity: Discourse in the World*, 4.

<sup>195</sup> Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulmán*, 10-11.

<sup>196</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

When I went to the Al-Mahdi in October of 2016, some of the members mistakenly believed that I was interested in becoming a Muslim. After we sat down, a tall and white old man started to tell me the history of Moorish Spain. When he finished his story, he concluded that the three religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam could coexist in relatively harmony. But most importantly, he presumed that Hussein was and still is important for the Latino community because Hussein could inspire them to stand against oppression and injustice.<sup>197</sup>

As I continued walking around the center, I noticed that some male Shia Muslims from El Paso believe that Latinos are more inclined than Americans to Islam because for them Latino culture tends to be more conservative whereas the American is more secular. “More [conservative] than Gringos,” one of them exclaimed. Surprisingly, they use some words such as gringo that predominate in Latin America culture. Moreover, they also think that Latinos are more disposed to embrace religion because of the Latin connection to Moorish Spain. Apparently, some of the Shia Arab Muslims believe that the Latino can relate more to Islam because in a certain way, Latinos are the descendants of the Spanish moors; a past that the Americans do not have.<sup>198</sup> In the eyes of the Shia Muslims of El Paso, the history of Muslim Spain explains why so many Mexican-American Latinos tend to reject their Catholic roots in favor for Islam. As if Latino Muslims had the predisposition to rediscover a faith that once belonged to them.

These Shia Muslims were not the only ones who believed that Latinos have a strong connection to the Moors. As we will see, some Latino Muslims, like Daniel and Ricardo, share the same idea. Since before being Muslims they did not feel a sense of belonging to any culture, after conversion they sought to build their new identity, an identity that was composed by three

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<sup>197</sup> Unknown member, interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, October 11, 2016.

<sup>198</sup> Unknown members, interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, October 11, 2016.

different cultural languages. During this process, these Latinos experienced what Michel de Certeau, a French scholar, calls *una vía de regresión*. In other words, in order to solve their identity crisis, these Latinos redefined their identity until they created a cultural language that harmonized their *Latinidad* with their faith<sup>199</sup>

Despite being a subjective term, “Moor” has not carried a negative connotation in the United States. On the contrary, since the seventh-century states such as Virginia have associated Moors to independent black Muslims inasmuch as exempting them from slavery. Until the nineteenth century the United States tended to depict Moors as being physically strong and free Negroes. Later on, at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century the idealization of the Moors inspired African-American communities to use the “Moors” as a tool to promote “resistance to oppression, strength, pride, morality, wisdom, community, connection to a rich cultural and religious heritage, and self-sufficiency.”<sup>200</sup>

After their conversion, many Latino Muslims see Muslim Spain as a source of inspiration from which to mold their new identities. As they reinvent their identity in order to find a new meaning and harmonize their *Latinidad* with their new faith, the appropriation of Spain’s history indicates that many Latino Muslims are “reclaiming their lost Muslim and African heritage- which they view more positively than the legacy of Catholicism.” Consciously or unconsciously, they try to relate their lives to the Moors and go back to their roots.<sup>201</sup>

When Daniel was twenty-seven years old he remembers seeing a clock that read exactly 7:11 p.m. Curiously, every time he looked at the clock, he saw the same hour hitting him again and again. Four years later, he was still seeing the number 7:11 and after researching the meaning of this number, he learned that on this date (711 A.D.) the Arab Muslims invaded

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<sup>199</sup> Certeau, *La toma de la palabra y otros escritos políticos*, 58-60.

<sup>200</sup> Bowen, “U. S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920,” 166.

<sup>201</sup> Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 265.

Spain. When Daniel learned this, he felt as a new man, as if he was reborn. He saw himself in the mirror and the figure standing on it was neither European nor Mexican; he was something else: a Latino Muslim.<sup>202</sup>

As a Latino Muslim, Daniel believes that Hispanics and Arabs have more similarities than differences. He connects his identity to Moorish Spain because both communities use some similar words, have common physical features, and several cultural Spanish manifestations, which have been appropriated by the Latinos through history, have an Arab influence. For example, according to Daniel, flamenco, the guitar, and the torero are from Arab origin. He loves to know how Islam has historically influenced his Latinidad; he feels it is in his DNA<sup>203</sup>

Ricardo admires Islam's history in Spain to the point that he has connected certain aspects of his life to the Moors; from simple factors such as the environment to more complex elements like identity. For example, just like the Moors had to coexist with different religious communities in Spain in arid areas, Ricardo does it in El Paso, interacting with Sunni Muslims, Jews, and other Christians on the desert zone of El Paso. Moreover, he believes that the miscegenation between the different religious communities (Jews, Christians, Muslims) of Spain during the Moorish conquest of Spain produced a new type of men. Connecting this process to his identity, he says that he does not feel like most Hispanics. He thinks that he is different, something new, a different breed of people. And just like his father, Ricardo sees himself as a descendant from the Moors since he feels their blood inside of his veins.<sup>204</sup>

However, not all of the Latino Muslims see the Moors as being part of their cultural history. Latino Muslims such as Flor, Alma, Joshua, and Vilma did not find a connection between their new identity and the moors. Since they have attached their identity to their ethnic

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<sup>202</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>203</sup> Daniel García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso Texas, November 25, 2016.

<sup>204</sup> Ricardo García, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 25, 2016.

culture, they have not felt the necessity of exploring new cultures. In fact, some of them like Vilma and Joshua ignored the existence of Moorish Spain. However, in other cases Latino Muslims feel that the Moors contradict their personal ideals and values. For example, Kathy views the Moors as conquerors, and since she is against imperialism and injustice, she does not see a connection between her identity and the Moors. Similarly, for this same reason she does not feel American. She believes that the American government is an imperial power that oppresses minority communities: immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims, African Americans. Her American identity and the Moors contradict her principles.<sup>205</sup> Others like Omar Hernández do not link their identity to the Moors simply because he believes that it is a history that only Latin Americans have; a lost history that many of them have forgotten, Omar commented.<sup>206</sup> Lastly, the Mexican concept of the mestizo pushes Latino Muslims to believe that they could have more than a cultural connection to the Moors. Amanda has been curious about the Moors because her grandma told her that she is the result of a mix of Natives and Spaniards. For this reason, Amanda has been curious about her grandmother's genealogy and has wants to have a DNA test to see if she is related to the Moors.<sup>207</sup>

### **Who am I?**

Vilma Luna speaks English, Spanish, and some Arabic. She usually uses her Spanish with her Muslims friends, who are trying to learn it, while they visit in restaurants, and shop in stores. She explained that she uses her Spanish more than English in the public sphere because she notices that when she uses her hijab, people tend to be afraid of her. She told me that some people give her mean looks and others become hesitant when she approaches them. In order to break these tensions, she speaks to them in Spanish to show them that she is not different from

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<sup>205</sup> Kathy Cruz, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 31, 2017.

<sup>206</sup> Omar Hernández, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, October 22, 2017.

<sup>207</sup> Amanda Martínez, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 8, 2017.

other Latinos. “Ay no sabíamos que usted hablaba español,” it is the most common answer Vilma receives after demonstrating that she is also a Latino. For this reason and because she lives in the Mexican-American border, she considers Spanish to be important for her life; it helps her to communicate, connect, with other Latinos. Moreover, for Vilma the Spanish language represents her ethnic roots. Meanwhile, the Arabic language helps her communicate with her Muslim “sisters” and read the Qur’an. However, she is still learning Arabic. For this reasons she reads the Qur’an and prays in Arabic and English. But she prefers that to pray in English in order to understand what she is saying, and therefore create a powerful connection to God.<sup>208</sup>

Vilma Luna speaks Spanish and is a Muslim; these elements are what make her a Latina Muslim. However, although Vilma did not specify when she identified herself as Muslim (before or after conversion), she mentioned that she was confused about who she was. Am I Latina, Hispanic, or Mexican-American? Who am I? The answer to these questions arrived when she was filling out documents from the federal government. One of these documents asked Vilma her race. There were a couple of options, including Mexican American, Latino, and Hispanic. Still struggling to decide who she was, one of the Federal officers approached her to help her resolver her identity crisis. He told her that in that section she should write Hispanic and Latina because she spoke Spanish and was born in a Mexican-American family. Since then, Vilma has seen herself as a Latino and a Hispanic. Vilma told me that even though she was born in the United States, her mom’s ethnic cultural identity is what makes her a Latina. “My Latinidad runs through my blood,” Vilma said.<sup>209</sup>

Historian Alebrto Hernández has argued that many U.S. Latino Muslims have looked at the past and see Moorish Spain as part of their cultural identity, appropriating The Moor’s

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<sup>208</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

<sup>209</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

mythical past to redefine their emerging identity. This process of going back to the past, Martínez-Vázquez states, send many Latino Muslims on a path of self-discovery of what it means to be a Latino and a Muslim. As Latinos find a coherent connection between their Latinidad and Moorish Spain, Márinez-Vázques argues, they refer to their conversion as a “reversion” because they feel that they are returning to their true ethnic roots.<sup>210</sup> Surprisingly, in this study only one of the Latinos interviewed called her conversion to Islam as a reversion, but interestingly, she did not associate it with Spain, but to Islam. As Yahya Lopez, an American Latino Muslim, states:

“When we said we ‘reverted’ back to Islam, we therefore were, in effect, saying that we had returned, migrated back or come home to our original condition from which we had been voluntarily returning to that primordial form.”<sup>211</sup>

Instead of seeing herself as a convert, Vilma perceives herself as a revert. This means that she believes that humanity descended from Adam and Eve. However, as time passed by the human race separated itself from God’s original plans. New religions were born and the ones that continued to worship God, such as the Catholic Church, distorted God’s message with the purpose of gaining wealth and power. These religions separated themselves from the truth, Vilma concluded. By adopting Islam, she reverted to God’s true ideology.<sup>212</sup> Different from other Muslims who have associated their reversion to Moorish Spain, Vilma links it to a history that portrays humanity as the sons and daughters of Allah.

In this chapter, we saw how Latino Muslims use their ethnic cultural language to resolve their identity crisis after embracing Islam. The majority of the Latinos who participated in this study associated the Spanish language to their Latino identity. However, after becoming

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<sup>210</sup> Narbona, Pinto, and Karam, *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, 266-267.

<sup>211</sup> Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulmán*, 93.

<sup>212</sup> Vilma Luna, Interview by Alan Ventura, El Paso, Texas, November 6, 2017.

Muslims, the Spanish language led these Latinos (the ones who practice their ethnic culture and the ones who do not) into different paths of self-discovery. The Latino Muslims who still practice their ethnic culture simply use the Spanish language to recognize themselves as Mexican-American Muslim Latinos. On the other hand, the Latino Muslims who do not practice their ethnic culture fail to identify with any cultural group because they do not feel Mexican, American, or Arab. Their Muslim identity creates an identity crisis that forces them to reimagine themselves until they form a coherent cultural language that gives their identity a *raison d'être*, manifesting itself in the appropriation of the history of the Moors. By stating this, I am saying that both Latino groups, those who still practice culture and those who do not, practice two different cultural languages. However, although they manifest certain differences, I believe that there are some codes within both cultural languages that in the end, allow Latino Muslims to work together and form institutions to legitimize their cultural group: their Latinidad, the Spanish language, and their Muslim religious practices.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I argued that Latino Muslims from El Paso created a new cultural language when they negotiated and reimagined their Latinidad within the frameworks of Islam.

Understanding the process of conversion in this way is important because it shows the process by which they negotiated the cultural codes (their Mexican cultural practices, food, and Spanish language) from their Mexican cultural language with Islam's (Islam's religious practices, hijab, Islam's dietary restrictions, and Arabic language). Latino Muslims embraced new cultural codes such as Islam's religious cultural practices, halal aliments, and the Arabic language, abandoned previous ones such as alcohol, their Catholic idealization of Jesus Christ, Mexican cultural dishes with pork, and merged them with others in order to harmonize their Latino identity with Islam. As a result of this process, Latinos generated new codes that when put together produced new grammatical rules that regulated the individual's new identity. Each individual formed their own and unique cultural language because each one of them negotiated both cultural languages differently. However, if one looks at this process closer, one can find that in the end each Latino Muslim's cultural language was connected to each other because they share a myriad of cultural codes such as practicing their ethnic cultural practices under Islamic law, adopting their cuisine to conform to Islam's dietary restrictions, and continue speaking Spanish in order to celebrate their Latinidad as Muslims.

My research highlights the ways in which Latino Muslims created two distinct cultural languages. In the first group Latino Muslims who were close to their ethnic cultural roots tended to negotiate their Mexican customs and food with Islam. This negotiation carried on until a new coherent cultural language was developed. However, this process generated an identity crisis in many of my interviews because they felt that they did not belong to the Mexican, American, and/or Arab community. In order to solve this crisis, they sought recourse in the Spanish

language which allowed Latino Muslims to link their identity to Mexico, thereby creating a sense of being a Mexican-American Muslim. Meanwhile, if Latino Muslims were separated from their ethnic culture, they instead reimagined their Latino identity. This process of reimagining continued until a new coherent cultural language emerged. Since this group do not celebrate any cultural practice or even consume dishes that carry cultural symbolisms, they look at their Latinidad, their Spanish language and their ethnic roots, to reimagine their identity. This process has led some Latino Muslims to look toward the past to redefine their Latino identity within the religious frameworks of Islam. This new cultural language has led many Latino Muslims to feel a cultural connection with Moorish Spain. However, even though not all of the interviewees shared the same codes or grammatical rules that shaped their own cultural language, collectively they share a crucial element: their Latinidad.

Despite having a relatively small sample size, I believe that the experience of the nine individuals I interviewed represent larger trends within the Latino Muslim community in the United States because every Latino who seeks to become a Muslim experiences the same cultural struggles. Based on my research, I deduce that in the United States Latinos will produce two cultural languages. In the first group Latino Muslims will combine their ethnic's cultural language with Islam, thereby producing in each Latino's community a distinct cultural language based on nationality. In contrast, the Latino Muslims who are not close to their ethnic cultural language will instead reimagine their Latinidad until they harmonize it with Islam. This process will push some of these individuals to look at Moorish Spain and appropriate their history with the purpose of finding a meaning in Islam. However, not always being this case, others will simply inhabit the realms of three cultural languages, but always holding their Latinidad as the core of their identity.

## Interviews

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## **CURRICULUM VITA**

Born and raised in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Alan Efrén Ventura Pérez graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) as a historian with a minor in education. As an educator, he has a Texas teacher certification to teach at the high school level (8-12). During his undergraduate years, he published a lesson plan in the UTEP's Center for History Teaching & Learning to help teachers engage students with course material. Therefore, he has attended pedagogical conferences to become a better educator in the classroom. Following his passion, he attended El Paso Holocaust Museum & Study Center's 2016 Educators' Conference.

During the past years, Alan has participated in several academic conferences that have consisted on creating a discourse on marginalized communities. In 2016 he presented "Mujeres en el narcotráfico: uso del cuerpo femenino como un eje de sobrevivencia ante la de pobreza y marginalidad social en Ciudad Juárez" in XXXVIII Convegno Internazionale di Americanistica (Puebla, México). In 2017, he participated as a speaker in the colloquium: "La toma de palabra en espacios públicos," in the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana XOCHIMILCO. (Mexico City, Mexico).

Currently, he is a graduate teaching assistant in UTEP. In December 2017, he will graduate with a M.A in history from UTEP. Alan has developed a passion for fascism and communism. He seeks in the future to pursue a Ph.D. in European history.

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This thesis/dissertation was typed by Alan Efrén Ventura Pérez