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## **Dekalb, Illinois, Muslim Women's Agency Negotiating and Re-Affirming Their Muslim Identity**

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## ABSTRACT

### DEKALB, ILLINOIS, MUSLIM WOMEN'S AGENCY NEGOTIATING AND RE-AFFIRMING THEIR MUSLIM IDENTITY

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Post 9/11 American Muslim women are stereotyped as victims of their patriarchal religion and as perpetrators of terror. These conditions led to the discrimination of American Muslim women which requires them to continuously strategize and negotiate their identity. This thesis examined DeKalb, Illinois Muslim women's agency to strategize and negotiate their identity in larger American society. In this study, fifteen Muslim women from three different categories were interviewed: American-born citizens, naturalized citizens, and immigrants. This study found that Muslim women's various backgrounds (country of origin, education, socio-economic status, and immigration status) affected their strategy and agency to negotiate and re-affirm their identity. This thesis shows that American Muslim women display a new way to practice Islam, retaining their religious beliefs and cultural identities while offering an alternative discourse to American society about Muslim women through the practice of conviviality and an alternative interpretation of Islam.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

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DEKALB, ILLINOIS MUSLIM WOMEN'S AGENCY IN NEGOTIATING  
AND RE-AFFIRMING THEIR MUSLIM IDENTITY

BY

SINTA FEBRINA  
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Andrea K. Molnar

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**For my brightest stars ... Salman, Daniel, and Keira**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH STUDY

My thesis project focuses on a Muslim women's agency in DeKalb, Illinois. My research sought to study Muslim women's strategies in negotiating and re-affirming their Muslim identity in a pluralistic and secular American culture that is often hostile toward the Muslim community. I examined Muslim women's experiences based on whether the women were American-born, naturalized Americans, immigrants who are permanent residents, or international students.

My research aimed to address the following interrelated research questions:

1. How do women negotiate and re-affirm their Muslim identity in a pluralistic and secular culture that is often hostile toward Muslims?
  - a. Is Muslim identity negotiation influenced by other identity issues, such as diaspora identity?
  - b. Do age, socio-economic status, and education impact how women will strategize, negotiate, and express their Muslim identity?
2. Is there variation in women's negotiation of Muslim identity based on whether the women are American born, naturalized Americans, immigrants who are permanent residents, or international students?

I hypothesize that the *halaqa*, which is a women's-only religious study group, is a strategy used in identity negotiation to re-affirm Muslim identity. Both participant observations



and follow-up interviews with participants were essential parts of data collection for this study of women who were members of the *halaqa* group.

My research utilized and was informed by a number of anthropological analytical frameworks. Given that the DeKalb Islamic community is grounded in diaspora from a range of countries with Islamic populations, I used Appadurai's (1996) and Hall's (1990) frameworks on diaspora and diaspora identity. In considering the Muslim women's agency in the ways they negotiated their identity, I also used Foucault's framework on power and discourse in the face of the dominant negative discourse on Muslims. Ortner's (2006) concept of agency was utilized to explore the relationship between agency and power of the DeKalb Muslim women. Hall's theoretical framework of the correlation between diaspora and the influence of power on the production of identity was also utilized.

My thesis argues that other identity issues such as diaspora identity, age, socio-economic status, and education level influence Muslim women's identity negotiation. These factors impact how women strategize, negotiate, and express their Muslim identity. My analysis used the concept of conviviality to understand how DeKalb Muslim women navigate their lives in American society. Conviviality is a concept used to describe and transcend interaction across cultural differences. The concept of conviviality is central to multiculturalism studies and reflects its affective associations in which the actions can be considered seriously for multicultural life (Neal, Bennett, Cochrane, & Mohan, 2013).

There have been very few studies on the agency of Muslim women in the ways they express and re-affirm their Muslim identity in a pluralistic secular society. In contrast, a lot of media reports have highlighted Muslim women as victims due to their visibly identifiable head coverings. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of the agency and the

alternative discourse of Muslim women. This study may also be helpful locally to the DeKalb community, including Northern Illinois University's International Program, by providing more strategic support to Muslim women.

I elaborate on the background of the study in Chapter 2 and explain the short history of Muslims in America, the treatment of Muslims after 9/11, the unique experiences of Muslim women, and conviviality in multicultural life. In Chapter 3, I explain in greater detail the methods of data collection for this study through a review of literature. I also address the theoretical and analytical frameworks that guided the study as well as the key concepts from each framework such as diaspora, dominant discourse and alternative discourse, agency, identity, and Muslim women-only study circle (*halaqa*). I present the data from my fieldwork in Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 provides analysis of the field data utilizing the theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts that guided the research. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature on Muslim women's identity negotiations, particularly considering the ways the results of this study contradict or differ from the findings in the existing literature.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### Short History of Islam in America

Since the twentieth century, an increase of Muslim immigrants from different countries—Arab countries (Syria, Saudi Arabia, etc.), South Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, etc.), and European countries (Albania)—have come to America. In 1952, approximately 20 mosques established the Federation of Islamic Associations in the U.S. This association was joined by Muslim immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds and engaged in a range of activities such as annual meetings in which members taught each other various aspects of Islam, prayed together, and held political and cultural events. This association celebrated American patriotism and cultural integration.

The strong connection between the practice of Islam and the mosque was coined as “Americanization” by Abdo Elkholy, an Egyptian sociologist who taught at Northern Illinois University (as cited in Curtis, 2009, p. 57). In 1959, Muslims who were active in mosque activities were more likely to assimilate into middle-class American culture. According to their values, to be a good Muslim is to be an excellent American and vice versa. These American Muslims found a way to reconcile their faith with the social and political pressures as well as the pressures of cultural assimilation, and they were proud of their ethnic heritage and considered themselves true Americans (Curtis, 2008, 2009). Muslim American immigrants increasingly turned to religion rather than ethnic and national origins as their primary source of identity.

Concerns about the sexual revolution, the economy, and other domestic issues occurring during the 1970s led some Muslim Americans, as well as Christian Americans, to conclude that a massive religious revival was needed to save the world (Curtis, 2008, 2009).

In 1965, there was a change in U.S. immigration laws that allowed more non-white people to immigrate to America, including Muslims from Asia and Africa. There was no record on how many immigrants were Muslims because the U.S. government did not ask about religious affiliations on immigration documents. However, in 1966-1997, there were approximately 2,780,000 immigrants who came from countries that were predominantly Muslim. One demographer estimated that 1.1 million of the immigrants were Muslims. These Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeastern Europe, the Caribbean, South America, and Canada (Curtis 2009).

### Being Muslim in America after 9/11

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda, a militant Islamist multi-national organization, claimed the attacks on New York's World Trade Center, which killed approximately 3,000 people. Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, considered the attacks a religiously sanctioned retribution for the suffering of Muslims caused by U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. American Muslim citizens, organizations, and leaders quickly stated their position in opposing terrorism and condemned these actions as un-Islamic. However, in October 2001, the Patriot Act was passed and used as justification to round up approximately 1,200 Americans who were Arab or South Asian descendants and other Muslim men for suspicion of possible ties to terrorism. Also, the FBI interviewed 8,000 American Muslim men to probe their possible connection to terrorist groups. These actions contributed to the suspicions toward American

Muslims' patriotism. During the war on terrorism, Muslim American life was vulnerable to prejudice. The number of hate crimes soared to 1,700 percent, including violent assaults against Muslims, attacks against places of worship, and personal harassment such as being told to "go back to their country" by fellow Americans (Curtis, 2009, p. 100). The anti-Muslim sentiment became more common throughout America, and American Muslims came under attack by fellow Americans as a result of the belief that they are a monolithic group. Muslims were considered a threat to American society and treated as unworthy of the universal protections afforded by American citizenship (Selod, 2015).

According to Tindongan (2011), Muslim immigrants in the United States wrestled with the changes of mainstream American life after the events of 9/11 when U.S. media overrepresented news coverage of individuals and activities associated with the extreme and non-mainstream interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, she explains that Muslim immigrants, especially Muslim women in the U.S., experienced a multitude of misunderstandings based on their appearance and their origin. The 9/11 event negatively impacted the lives of Muslims in the U.S. as a result of negative imagery of Muslims and a common understanding of singular Muslim identity as monolithic, oppressed, one-dimensional, and oriented toward terror. The events of 9/11 not only altered the cultural landscape of U.S. mainstream communities, but it also changed the way Muslim people self-identify and how others identify them. This condition forced them to negotiate multiple identities. Muslim U.S. citizens live much like every other citizen, even as they are perceived as threatening outsiders (Tindongan, 2011).

Since the 9/11 attack, Muslims in America have experienced racialization. Racialization is not only ascribed to bodies such as skin tone but also other cultural factors such as language, clothing, and beliefs. Racialization is a process of racial formation in which racial categories are

created continuously and are occupied and destroyed within a specific political, social, and economic context. Muslims in the U.S. experienced racialization, which included rejection from social membership or belonging to and acquiring the status of an enemy, and being viewed as inherently violent and oppressive to women (Selod, 2015). According to (Selod, 2015), the War On Terror started after 9/11 was to target terrorism rather than individual nations, which classified a myriad of ethnicities and nationalities into a monolithic category of Muslims. Although not formally recognized, the term Muslim became a de facto racial classification in America.

#### Muslim Women in America: Veiling as a Physical Identifier of Religion

Since 9/11, the mainstream media has focused the spotlight mainly on extremist Islamic ideologies and subsequent terrorist acts. A central aspect of this ideology includes forcing extreme interpretations of Islamic Law on all Muslim women (Lichter, 2009). As a result of 9/11 and the War on Terror, Muslim women have been portrayed by mainstream media as an oppressed group who needs to be liberated. As cited in Abu-Lughod (2002) and Haddad, Smith, and Moore (2006), First Lady Laura Bush's radio address on November 17, 2001, reinforced a division between civilized people and terrorists. Mrs. Bush stated that civilized people are people who are sympathetic to the plight of Muslim women and children in extremist regimes such as that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. She said that because terrorists are people who want to impose their views on the rest of the world, Muslim women needed to be liberated so they were no longer imprisoned in their homes and could listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment (Haddad et al., 2006).

According to (Gecewics, 2017), a Pew Research Center survey found that Muslims expressed wariness and anxiety about aspects of their lives in the U.S. However, Muslim women were more pessimistic about their place in American society compared to Muslim men. The veil or headscarf worn by Muslim women renders them easily identifiable as Muslims and increases the visibility of the growing Muslim population in non-Muslim majority or secular countries, especially in Western countries like the United States. However, because of the negative portrayal of Muslim women by mainstream Western media, this practice is viewed by Western societies and feminists as a symbol of oppression by men and their patriarchal religion (Al Wazni, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. The many reasons and factors behind Muslim women's decisions regarding the veiling practice were primarily ignored, as Muslim women were being stereotyped as oppressed, weak, and incapable of thinking for themselves.

Compared to other Western countries, living in the U.S. gave Muslim women more freedom of choice to practice or not to practice veiling; there are no laws or formal regulations that ban Muslim women from exercising their religious freedom to wear a veil, although some countries such as France, Switzerland, Turkey, and Indonesia have issued a policy<sup>2</sup> banning veiling practices. In 2004, a French law was implemented to prohibit public school students from wearing clothing affiliated to any religion, including the veil, a cross necklace, and medallions. However, only the head veil banning was enacted. A French law required public spaces to be neutral. Neutrality of the state also became the main factor for veil prohibition in Switzerland.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the veil worn by Muslim women, based on her study in Egypt, Khafagy (2005) explained, besides being a religious phenomenon, veiling was also an ideological and socio-economic phenomenon. Veil has been worn by some Muslim women as a symbol of Islamization and as the public face of their revivalist position. Veiling conveys a certain vision of womanhood that encompasses the traditional values of honor, virtue, and political protest against Western beauty standards. In some cases, veiling may also symbolize class differences between the middle class and working-class women (Khafagy 2005:43).

<sup>2</sup> Directorate General Education, Prof. Darmodiharjo Darji, issued Decree 052/C/Kep/D 82 concerning National School Uniforms on 17 March 1982. This policy led to the banning of the headscarves in public schools.

Meanwhile, in countries where the population is predominantly Muslim, such as Indonesia and Turkey, veil banning has also occurred. Although there was no evidence that showed a correlation between veiling practices and extremism, apart from a baseless assumption, the governments of Turkey and Indonesia banned the veil to combat radicalism (Osman, 2015).

According to recent research, more Muslim women (57%) compared to Muslim men (43%) say that in past years it has become more difficult to be Muslim in the U.S.. In the 2017 Pew Research Center study, Muslim women were more likely than men to have experienced some form of discriminatory treatment. They also expressed more apprehension than men about anti-Muslim discrimination.<sup>3</sup> From the survey, 55% of women said they had experienced at least one of several specific types of anti-Muslim prejudice. Examples of discrimination included having been treated with suspicion, called offensive names, singled out by airport security or other law enforcement, and physically threatened or attacked. Muslim women also say that their appearance—wearing a veil or *hijab*—identifies them as Muslim. According to the Pew Research study, 64% of Muslim women whose head coverings identified them as Muslim have experienced discrimination (Gecewics, 2017). Based on this research, to unveil would be the easiest way to hide their identity in public as a Muslim to avoid discrimination. However, according to Bartkowski and Read (2000), there appears to be an increasingly pervasive practice of veiling among Muslim women around the world, including within the U.S. (Bartkowski & Read, 2003).

The veil worn by Muslim women is assumed to be a sign of oppression forced on them by Muslim men. This discourse of oppression has become a central and contemporary concern about Muslim women at the global level. There are many forms of veiling and covering, each of

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<sup>3</sup> (Antepli, 2011; Harrison, 2016; Herda, 2018; Yazdiha, 2019)



them with different meanings in the communities in which they are used. In the contemporary Muslim world, veiling must not be interpreted as the quintessential sign of women's subjugation. When it comes to clothing choice, even in the Western world, there are socially shared standards followed by women. Furthermore, a Muslim woman is more than a single item of clothing, and there are more pressing issues regarding Muslim women that need greater attention (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Besides being a symbol of oppression, some Americans who do not understand the meaning of veiling have also treated Muslim women who practice veiling as if they are a threat to Western cultural values (Selod, 2015).

Living in a secular society inhabited predominantly by Christians creates some dilemmas associated with the veiling practice. In a study about identity negotiation among Muslim women in Texas, a Muslim respondent argued that veiling makes her feel special and underscores her cultural distinctiveness and uniqueness. Regardless of the controversy within Muslim society about veiling, both the veiled and unveiled women in the study exercised agency in crafting their identities. The study lends further credence to the insight that culture is not merely a product created by the discourse of the elites to be consumed untransformed by social actors. The study emphasizes the agency of Muslim women in recrafting Islamic culture and suggests that the all-male Muslim religious leaders do not monopolize power (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). The reclaiming of Islamic values of veiling practices also generates a sentiment of solidarity among Muslim women, affirming their religion and identity (Al Wazni, 2015).

Studies show Muslim women are not a homogeneous group; some even have the opinion that veiling should be viewed as a flexible practice. There is a broad spectrum of how Muslim women view Islamic Law, and it is reflected in various studies on Muslim women in different countries (Lichter, 2009). In her research on the theory of fashion, Reina Lewis, a British

professor of cultural studies, found there are Muslim women who decided to stop wearing a veil after a process of various lengths to overcome their fear of displeasing God by doing so. Political overtones of the veil became one of the reasons for the decision. For these Muslim women, the veil became a hindrance for their spiritual growth and prevented them from expressing themselves. They viewed the decision to stop wearing the veil as a way to be liberated from the politicization of the veil. This initially private decision eventually garnered various reactions from Muslim and non-Muslim communities. While non-Muslim communities see this as a positive message toward the liberation of Muslim women, some Muslim women experienced backlash for their decision to stop wearing the veil. These women faced judgment from Muslim communities because the veil in Muslim societies has become a moral standard of a good Muslim woman. However, by removing their veils, these Muslim women wanted to convey a strong message that being a good Muslim is not defined by whether they practice veiling (Lewis, 2015).

According to Haddad, Smith, and Moore (2006), American Muslim women, a growing community in the U.S., view themselves not only as Muslims who may also have other identities but also as Americans who happen to be of the Islamic heritage. To be successful, to be happy, and perhaps merely to survive, these women have to make certain compromises. Muslim women are searching for ways to define and negotiate their identity and their place in their families, their communities, and American society without wholeheartedly subscribing to either the cultural expectation of the American culture or the expectations of religious leaders of the Islamic community. Muslim women realize they must not isolate themselves from the larger American society but try to claim public space to have a significant voice in shaping American discourse, attitudes, and policies toward Muslim Americans (Haddad et al., 2006).

In a study on how Yemeni Muslim youth negotiate their identity in America, it was found that Yemeni girls removed their veil in resistance to their parents, their home culture, and the community, but they also resisted the school culture that frames hijab/veil wearers with a singular identity. There was an awareness among these girls that they were viewed as oppressed and their veils were an object of contempt, curiosity, and pity and young Muslim women resented this presumption. The term Muslim-American includes American as a signifier label of a person who is not only an American but also happens to be a Muslim. However, this label defines the person by her religion rather than nationality or ethnicity or any other way she wishes to identify. It is problematic to emphasize the Muslim part of a person's identity in a way that is not done for Christians (Mir, 2014; Tindongan, 2011). Both Mir and Tindongan's study on Muslim youth identity negotiation is significant to my research for describing the ideological and cultural challenges faced by Muslims and Muslim youth in America, and the ways they create their agency in negotiating their identity.

In the study of Muslim women on an American campus, Mir (2014) explained that Muslim women who wear a head covering sought an insulated world, or self-segregation, for comfort because through their veil, they were marked with the visible stigma of Muslim identity, even though it does not seem appropriate that students should spend all the college years in protective enclaves. As Mir (2014) argues, this situation occurs despite the efforts of higher education leaders. The widespread power of the mainstream campus culture was not affected since there was a lack of official campus policy on minority students. In the union and dorms along with the local bars and nightclubs, where diverse identities are most vulnerable, mainstream campus-leisure culture dictates policy by appropriation, and thus, to belong, Muslim women must learn to disavow their minority identities. Mir (2014) argues that since official

policies do not cover marginalized identities, these policies are perceived as having forfeited social protection against all kinds of aggression and discrimination against minority students. Thus, to escape discrimination, the only option is assimilation. Since my research included Muslim students, Mir's study provided an overview of the problems faced by Muslim women on an American campus, as explained by a number of participants of this study in Chapter 4.

Muslim women as a minority group in the U.S. often have to negotiate their identities carefully, and most of them find themselves caught between patriarchy and racism. Muslim women might be treated as traitors by their community when they speak out about gender violence while at the same time reinforcing negative stereotypes of being oppressed and having a backward culture in contrast to the majority society. Thus, they are in a double bind. Muslim women do not want to give ammunition to Islamophobes; on the other hand, they also do not wish to remain silent if something needs to be corrected. They need to be tactful (Carland, 2017). Studies that show a broad spectrum of Muslim women's idea of their religion provide evidence that they are not a homogenous group, which is significant for my research on how these Muslim women as individuals defined and re-affirmed their Muslim identity.

### Conclusion

Even though the religion of Islam has been in America since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Islam is still considered an alien religion and Muslims in America are still viewed as foreigners and outsiders. This phenomenon is more evident since the terrorist attacks in September 2001. The inaccurate portrayal of Islam and Muslims by mainstream media have contributed to misunderstandings of the Islam and Muslim religions. While Muslims in America, in general, have experienced racialization and discrimination, Muslim women who wear a veil in America

received the worst effect because of their visibility. Muslim women in America have been struggling to re-affirm and negotiate their identities since then. This background literature review served to provide a context for my thesis project. The next chapter turns to the discussion of my data collection methods and to the theoretical/analytical frameworks that guided my study, particularly the analytical concepts from respective theoretical frameworks central to my data analysis.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter address the methods used in this study and the theoretical/analytical frameworks by Stuart Hall, Arjun Appadurai, Michel Foucault and Sherry B. Ortner on diaspora, power and the production of identity that guided the study and data analysis. It also presents key concepts from each framework such as diaspora, dominant discourse and alternative discourse and agency of Muslim women. In addition, Muslim women-only study circles (*halaqa*) are considered in relation to the methods used for this research study. This chapter also explains the importance of the concept of conviviality to multicultural life.

#### Methods

I started my fieldwork in early December 2018. I used convenience sampling to recruit participants, which “consists of any group readily accessible to the researcher that reasonably might be assumed to possess characteristics relevant to the study” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 233). In this study, I leverage individuals that were approachable and available during the fieldwork to recruit participants. In addition, I am also a member of the DeKalb Muslim community and occasionally attend *halaqa*. In this study, my role was a researchers and also part of the community that was studied. My position as a member of this community gave me an advantage in gaining the participants’ trust, which simplified the recruitment process. My positionality did not exist independent of the research process.

Therefore, it was important to continuously practiced reflexivity. Reflexivity is a continuous process of introspection on the role of subjectivity in the research process, so the research would portray aspects of social phenomena in their entirety and within the context of those experiencing them (Palaganas et al., 2017).

DeKalb, as a suburban city that attracts international students from all over the world – including Muslim students, was a fit site for my study. My research project was conducted among Muslim women in DeKalb’s Islamic Community. The Islamic Center of DeKalb was established in 2015 with the construction of a new mosque. Prior to this, the ISNIU (Islamic Society of Northern Illinois University), which was established in mid-1980s, had organized the Friday Prayers at different locations in DeKalb for several years. The property on 801 Normal Street was purchased in early 2000 and the proposal was unanimously passed by the zoning committee and city council after several meetings and intense work with lawyers and city officials. The construction of the mosque started in 2013 after a special used permit was obtained in 2012, and the construction was completed in Ramadan of 2015 (Islamic Center of DeKalb, n.d.).

This community is very diverse and includes international students, immigrants who are either permanent residents or citizens, and those who were born in the U.S. The community is centered on the local mosque (house of worship), which is also the site of DeKalb’s Islamic Community Center on Normal Road. Participants for the study were recruited from this community center’s membership and also from among the religious study circle of women (*halaqa*).

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with DeKalb Muslim women. Since there is no census database on religious affiliations in the U.S., there are no data on the

size of the Muslim population in DeKalb. I used heterogenous purposive sampling to secure diversity of the participants. My initial plan for the sample size was 18 Muslim women from three different categories with six participants from each category. However, during the fieldwork, I only found four U.S.-born Muslim women who live in DeKalb and was only able to interview three of them, which reduced my sample size to 15. I set 20 as the minimum age for the sample, so the participants were born before 9/11 and old enough to remember the event.

In my questionnaire, all participants were asked about which Islamic tradition they followed. However, none of them provided an answer to the question. Their responses were either they do not have knowledge of Islamic tradition or they practiced Islam the way they were taught in their country. According to one of my participants, my question about what particular Islamic denomination they adhered to may cause division in the DeKalb Muslim community, especially the *halaqa*. Some Muslims are sensitive about the Islamic traditions; for example Shia Muslims may not want to affiliate with Sunni Muslims and vice versa. I decided not to pursue this question further because the question may cause harm to the DeKalb Muslim community.

Before the interviews, I informed each interviewee about my research focus and provided pseudonyms, and after obtaining their verbal consent, the interview started. The interviews consisted of semi-structured and open-ended questions about the everyday lives of the participants before and after 9/11. Questions included where they lived before and after 9/11, if there were any changes in their relationships with their neighbors/friends/co-workers/etc. after the attacks, and what their job or educational experience was. I also asked about their country of origin to understand which experiences were related to their religion and their traditional customs, respectively. Aside from the semi-structured interviews, I conducted participant observation in the *halaqa*.



Since the literature suggests the *halaqa* is a phenomenon that allows Muslim women agency and the challenging of dominant discourses, and even in some cases to re-affirm their Muslim identity in a pluralistic American society, I observed the activities of the religious study group and interviewed participants about the ways they view the *halaqa*. I also observed the social dynamic in this activity: how they choose the leader, how many people joined in this activity, and the proportion and distribution of the people according to their age, nationalities, status, and how they interact with each other. As part of DeKalb Muslim community, I occasionally participated in the *halaqa*, which is conducted at the leader's house, once a month before the fieldwork started and two times during my fieldwork. DeKalb Muslim women-only *halaqa* is held on the second Friday of the month at 6 pm at Aisyah's house, the initiator and leader of this activity.

Also, I elicited data from Muslim women in DeKalb through semi-structured interviews and then followed up with structured interviews. The interviews explored these women's range of experiences as Muslim in American society. The interviews shed light on how these women view their identity and the ways they negotiate identity based on their demographic backgrounds such as age, ethnicity, country of origin, education, Islamic denomination background (Sunni, Wahabi, Salafi, Hanafi), socio-economic background, and/or length of stay in the U.S. All these factors were assumed to influence their decisions in their interaction with larger American society. For example, socio-economic status might affect choices in their children's education: whether to put children in public (secular) school, private Islamic school, or home school. In addition, I took note of the places in which the participants choose to do the interviews. I

believed this choice might highlight their comfort level. A choice of public space may correlate with their sense of safety, as suggested by a study of plurality in England.<sup>4</sup>

I summarized the major themes that emerged from the interviews with a table. Table 1 highlights variations and commonalities related to the participants' experiences of being Muslim in America. I identified three common patterns from my data. First, all participants, to some extent, had safety concerns, including verbal/physical harassments and/or discriminations, due to their Muslim identity. Second, all participants, whether explicitly or implicitly, were making some effort to practice conviviality to be accepted by the larger American society. Third, the conviviality exercised by each participant varied, depending on their demographic background.

Table 1

Variations among Participants

| Name <sup>5</sup> | Age | Education             | American Resident Status | Traditional Outfit | Veil | Conviviality | <i>Halaqa</i> Participation |
|-------------------|-----|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Anna              | 46  | Ph.D.                 | Born Citizen             | No                 | No   |              |                             |
| Maryam            | 46  | Ph.D.                 | Naturalized Citizen      | No                 | Yes  | X            |                             |
| Hajra             | 22  | Grad Student (Master) | Naturalized Citizen      | No                 | Yes  | X            |                             |
| Sally             | 36  | College               | Born Citizen             | No                 | Yes  | X            |                             |
| Lina              | 50  | College               | Naturalized Citizen      | No                 | Yes  | X            | X                           |
| Kristie           | 26  | College               | Born Citizen             | No                 | Yes  |              | X                           |

Table continued on next page

<sup>4</sup> Mental maps served as guiding assessments of risk and safety in the city reveals social confidence or freedom of people (Warren 2017:787-792).

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms

Table cont. from previous page

|        |    |                         |                           |     |     |   |   |
|--------|----|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----|-----|---|---|
| Sari   | 37 | Grad Student (Doctoral) | Foreign Student           | No  | No  |   |   |
| Ira    | 38 | Grad Student (Doctoral) | Foreign Student           | No  | No  |   |   |
| Aisyah | 38 | Master                  | Naturalized Citizen       | Yes | Yes | X | X |
| Noor   | 26 | Master                  | Spouse of foreign student | Yes | Yes | X | X |
| Irma   | 37 | Master                  | Foreign Student           | No  | Yes |   |   |
| Fatima | 35 | Master                  | Naturalized Citizen       | Yes | Yes | X |   |
| Zahra  | 32 | College                 | Spouse of Foreign Student | Yes | Yes | X |   |
| Vina   | 48 | College                 | Naturalized Citizen       | No  | Yes |   | X |
| Tina   | 37 | College                 | Foreign Student           | No  | No  |   |   |

Note: x indicates similar experience, no x indicates variations

### Theoretical/Analytical Frameworks

#### Stuart Hall: Cultural Identity and Diaspora

In his study on Caribbean and African cultural identity and diaspora, Stuart Hall in Rutherford (1990) explains that cultural identity is always a continuous process of production instead of an accomplished fact. He suggests two different ways to view cultural identity: first, as a cultural identity defined in terms of shared culture for people who share history and ancestry. Within these terms, everyday historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide oneness and continuous frames of reference and meaning are analyzed. Second, besides

the similarities, cultural identity is also shaped by critical points of profound and significant differences caused by ruptures and discontinuities which create uniqueness.

According to Hall (1990), cultural identity is not grounded in an archaeological sense, but instead, it is a continuous process of production by re-telling the past. He argues that the construction of cultural identity is subjected to the critical exercise of power, which is perceived as a cultural identity constructed as different within the categories of knowledge as other. Therefore, cultural identities should be viewed as a positioning instead of essence because they will always be influenced by the dominant discourse set by those in power as well as memory, fantasy, narrative and myths of the past (Hall, 1990). Following Hall, Appiah and Gates (1995) also argue that identity is negotiable and hangs loosely and precariously in the domain of culture and politics.

Hall (1990) suggests that immigrants in a host country are people of a diaspora, which he defines as the recognition of significant heterogeneity and diversity. Diaspora is not about purity but hybridity. However, people in the West assumed that despite displacement, dismemberment, and transportation of origins, diaspora are unchanging. Therefore, he argued that regardless of the diversities of cultural identity, the dominant culture viewed groups with no common backgrounds, very much the same as the marginal, the underdeveloped, or the 'other' (Hall, 1990, pp. 228–235). Hall's cultural identity and diaspora frameworks and its key concepts are significant to my research in analyzing DeKalb Muslim women's experiences since they are mainly diaspora, who are in the endless process of repositioning and negotiating their identity.

Arjun Appadurai: Diaspora and Globalization

Appadurai (1996) offers a cultural study of globalization. Appadurai argues that instead of cultural homogenization, globalization emphasizes the concept of difference as the most valuable feature of the concept of culture. He suggests culture is a pervasive dimension of human discourse that exploits differences to generate diverse conceptions of group identity. He contends that globalization has created disjunctures among economy, culture, and politics and proposed four dimensions of global cultural flows to explore the disjunctures: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, and ideoscaples (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). Ethnoscape is the continuous change in the world we live in caused by migration and tourism that, to some degree, affect the politics of and between nations. Technoscape is the flow of technology driven by migration of labor or a multinational enterprise, whether it is high, low, mechanical, or informational across the world. Mediascaples refer to the distributions and the dissemination of information that mostly tend to be image-centered. Ideoscaples are composed of elements of worldviews and are often directly political and related to ideology and counter-ideology of the states (Appadurai, 1996, 2008). This framework underlines the cultural change triggered by the movement of people, technology, and ideology. Appadurai's scaples were useful analytical concepts for my study of Muslim women in DeKalb, given the diasporic composition of my sample.

According to Appadurai (1996), because of globalization, the very diversity of the U.S. population has made the conception of Americanness non-existent. America has become a post-national space and, as a country of immigrants, faces the challenges of diasporic pluralism. Exploitation of homogenization occurs in nation-states relations; therefore, because of the

inability to act to tolerate diversity, the U.S. moves toward homogenization of its citizens for the sake of stabilization (Appadurai, 1996, 2008).

In accordance with Appadurai, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) explain that migrations created the world of diaspora in which common lines between here and there, center and periphery, colony and metropole become blurred. The displacement of people is not only experienced by people who were geographically moved but is also experienced by people who remain in their familiar and ancestral places because the nature of their relationship to place has changed and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture was broken (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

Appadurai (1996, 2008) does not directly provide a specific definition of diaspora, but it is implicit in his discussion of ethnoscares. Appadurai suggests that these scapes have contributed to disjuncture in the politics of the global culture, specifically a disjuncture about the role of the nation-state that becomes problematic due to the blurred lines of geographical territory in the globalized world. The tendency toward homogenization is contradictory to Appadurai's framework of ethnoscares, technoscares, ideoscares, and mediascares. Appadurai's framework on diaspora, especially his concept of ethnoscares, was significant to my research because according to it, culture is not supposed to be associated with a tribe or people, and citizens of states do not always associate with a geographical territory. Appadurai's framework helped to explain how the American Muslim diaspora has shaped the identity of Muslim women and established their place in broader American society.

### Diaspora Studies

According to Tindongan (2011, p. 72), “Muslims in the U.S. are living in the diaspora.” Diasporas constitute lived experiences that usually presuppose longer distances and separations – more like an exile, with a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. On the other hand, it also connects multiple communities of a dispersed population. Muslim people migrated from their countries of origin to the U.S. prompted by globalization over the past several decades. They crossed borders to live in liminal space, spaces and places where marginalized people often reside outside their home country and yet are not quite at home in the new place, the U.S. The unevenness and ongoing inequity caused by the colonized history of the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and North Africa has created troubled diasporic transitions (Tindongan, 2011). Tindongan sought to answer to how living remotely from their cultural and religious origins impacts their choices on their way of life and which traditional or religious values they choose to implement or disregard to cope or adapt with an alien social environment. In exploring these strategies and coping mechanisms, it is also essential to examine how multiple identities have been managed by Muslim women. Identities as Muslims and as American are not always compatible. Identity negotiation came to be the result of stereotyping, misunderstandings and limitations put on them by the mainstream larger U.S. society (Tindongan, 2011).

The development of a clear understanding of tensions between two competing worldviews – the traditional/religious worldview and the modernist/secular – according to Sharify-Funk (2008), is essential to understand contemporary Muslim intellectualism. Sharify-Funk argues that a traditional/religious normative system is a past-oriented system of meanings

that appeal to historical conceptions of Muslim identity. Furthermore, Sharify-Funk (2008) explains that the traditional normative system derived its standards of meaning and values from the origin of the past, reflects a patriarchal ethos, and accentuates conventional male virtues, while a modernist paradigm is mostly a future-oriented system of meaning that highlights the agency of the individual in the negotiation of normative standards and the construction of social identity and meaning. In this paradigm, authority is contested and polycentric, it is also fluid and contextualized, and plurality is viewed as inevitable and sometimes desirable. The modernist paradigm recognizes that identities must be re-negotiated continuously and are not historically fixed (Sharify-Funk, 2008).

The studies of Muslim diaspora described and identified various ideological socio-cultural problems faced by people living in a diaspora. These studies are significant to my research that focused on the DeKalb Muslim women diaspora, in that they must continuously negotiate their identity within the larger American society.

#### Michael Foucault: Power and Discourse

Foucault explains that power and power relations are expressed through discourse. Discourse, according to Foucault (1980), is a system of knowledge produced by elites that have an impact on people in general. Discourse is the exhibit of immanent principles of regularity and are bound by regulations enforced through social practice of appropriation, control and policing (Foucault, 1980). Academics and professionals acquire legitimacy by adhering to particular standards and exhibiting specific characteristics (Murphy & Choi, 1997); therefore, a person or a group who controls and claims access to knowledge also controls power. According to Foucault, legitimate knowledge is a specific knowledge that serves a technological function for the



domination of people as a result of their capacity to establish a reign of ideological mystification in their ability to define a certain kind of empirical truth (Foucault, 1980; Murphy & Choi, 1997). As a discursive formation, specific knowledge produced by academics and professionals instills a specific perspective of the world. Knowledge production has limitations resulting from faulty methods, a narrow focus, and other possible errors in judgments. Also, discourses change since they are specific to a particular place and time. Thus, discourse has a historical context and therefore there is no ultimate truth. (Lewellen, 2003).

Foucault (1980) rejects liberal definitions of power as the ability to force people to do things through violence or threat of violence. He does not simply view power as residing in individuals, classes or in those who own the means of production. Power is not a matter of conscious intention or decision making (Lewellen, 2003). The knowledge produced by academics and professionals is assumed to be neutral due to the apparent rationality of the scientific procedures. Therefore, the power appears to be pervasive, natural, and normative and thus does not represent the triumph of one group over another because it is exercised in a manner that appears to be persuasive, neutral, and normative (Murphy & Choi, 1997). According to Foucault, this kind of power can be very damaging because it creeps slowly into the capillaries of societies because a dominant discourse sometimes culminates in requiring the racial or cultural superiority of particular persons or groups accepted by society (Murphy & Choi, 1997). Dominant discourse is a discourse that was created and serves as a political commodity for the power holder or the elites (Foucault, 1980). However, because the outcome of the knowledge is not ostensibly political or the product of overt aggression, the domination is not always realized (Murphy & Choi, 1997). Thus, power cannot be separated from knowledge and vice versa (Lewellen, 2003).

Scientists and various field specialists produce knowledge and are viewed as experts who have an authoritative voice. The accepted knowledge produced by experts can serve the political purposes of some groups for gaining or maintaining power, thus becoming the dominant discourse. The dominant discourse imbues power not just on those who produce it but those who disseminate it as the accepted and taken for granted public knowledge (Lewellen, 2003). Thus, dominant discourse should not be viewed as the ultimate truth because it was produced within a unique circumstance that specifies the relevance of certain questions, data, and answers. Therefore, through new explanations, alternative discourse can challenge the dominant discourse (Murphy & Choi, 1997, p. 26). Alternative discourses are subordinated and subjugated and exist outside the dominant discourse because they do not fit the truth set by the power holder (Lewellen, 2003).

The dominant discourse in the U.S., post 9/11 particularly, has viewed Muslim women as an oppressed and powerless group that needs to be saved or liberated. This view has been reinforced by mainstream media and has become legitimate knowledge. I used Foucault's (1980) theoretical framework to analyze how dominant discourse is shaping the knowledge of the majority American society about Islam and Muslim women, which eventually affects American society's behavior against Muslims. I also utilized Foucault's concept of alternative discourse for examining the discourses of these DeKalb Muslim women and how their alternative discourse empowers them and provides them agency given it challenges the currently existing dominant discourse.

Sherry B. Ortner: Agency

Agency is a power to act within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force. All social actors are assumed to have agency; however, agency is not free or unfettered. Instead agency is influenced by the social relations and interactions with others, including relations of power, inequality, and competition (Ortner, 2006). Agency has a component of intentionality that is directed toward definite goals that are shaped by different domains of social life such as social practices and social interactions. Thus, under different regimes of power, agency is differently shaped (Ortner, 2006). Even though agency is universal, the distribution of agency is not equal; some people have more and others have less depending on their position in social relations. However, agency is always interactively negotiated by individuals as social actors (Ortner, 2006).

Agency is a social power that historically has had its roots in questions of power from the outset; as a result, agency is mainly equated with the idea of resistance. However, agency is neither actions to exercise power or to resist power or to assimilate or retain distinctiveness but is the more complex relations between them. The key factors of agency are “intentionality” and the goal to pursue culturally defined projects, accomplished by the individual or the collective (Ortner, 2006, p. 139). According to Ortner, people’s goals or desires are shaped by their culture. Therefore, while agency may seem to be a property of individuals, agency is structured by a set of rules and ideologies underlying the culture in which an individual belongs (Ortner, 2006). I used Ortner’s concept of agency to explain these DeKalb Muslim women’s agency and how they negotiate their position in relation to their disposition in larger American society.

### Dominant and Alternative Discourse of Muslims in the U.S.

The dominant discourse on Muslims in the U.S. has led to homogenizing American Muslims into the other, where Muslim religious signifiers, behaviors, and beliefs as well as phenotypes (such as skin tone) signify terrorism, misogyny, fundamentalism, and sexism. However, the unique political, economic, and cultural differences of their countries of origins are being ignored (Selod, 2015). This discourse results in the racialization of Muslim men and women. When Muslim men were being deported and detained without due process, they lost the privileges associated with citizenship and human rights, while Muslim women were treated like they were in constant peril from Muslim men, which is a notion used to justify colonial and imperial actions. Muslim Americans who wear religious signifiers, such as veils worn by Muslim women, experience higher levels of scrutiny and interrogation about their American identity. This condition is a result of the widespread assumption that Muslim values are fundamentally opposed to American values (Selod, 2015). Furthermore, as a result of this mainstream view, Muslim women have been dichotomized into a good Muslim/bad Muslim binary. Muslim women who wear veils are regarded as religiously pious women who stubbornly adhere to their false consciousness on behalf of an aggressive patriarchal Muslim ideology. While Muslim women who have confined their religious practice to private space and prioritized their identity as national citizens rather than their ethnoreligious identity are regarded as good Muslims (Hussein, 2016), Western society is too focused on the veil and the perceived gender discrimination of Muslim women by Muslim men regarding the practice. Western society does not grasp the commitment of most Muslim women to their spiritual and cultural authenticity (Al-Hibri, 2005).

Most literature has discussed the dominant discourse on Muslims and Muslim women post 9/11 and how that event puts Muslim women in a negative light. However, there is minimal literature that discusses the efforts of Muslim women in turning the dominant negative discourse around or instead focus on the alternative discourse of Muslim women. The dominant discourse on Muslims and Muslim women has become a political commodity. However, according to Foucault (1980), dominant discourse is subject to re-appropriation reversibility and re-utilization and can be countered or criticized by an alternative discourse, a less popular knowledge that has been regarded as inadequate by the power holders.

According to Anwar (2015), Muslim women no longer accept the idea that Islam promotes injustice and mistreatment of women or the belief that the current concept of the ideal Muslim woman is based on patriarchy's construction in the name of religion. Muslim women are challenging the values of a patriarchal society in which the wife, daughter, and sister owe obedience to men as husband, father, and brother who exclusively hold power. In this current era, the number of women who are educated, travel the world, and maintain power and responsibility is increasing. For example, in Malaysia, almost 70 percent of the students enrolled in public institutions of higher learning are girls and there is 47 percent female labor force participation. Women's higher education and economic independence influence their confidence and courage to speak out in the face of injustice. For most Muslim women, rejecting religion is not an option. Therefore, today's Muslim women go directly to where the religion's source of injustice is committed in the name of religion (Anwar, 2005).

The emergence of women's religious study groups (*halaqa*) in many parts of the country has given Muslim women an essential role in the education of their children as well as other women. These women-only gatherings not only serve to promote direct religious knowledge and

deepening of faith but also are a support group for women who learn from each other and give each other encouragement (Haddad et al., 2006). For this study, I observed and participated in the Muslim women-only *halaqa* to investigate how these Muslim women find liberation, truth, and justice within their faith and to study how Muslim women re-negotiate their positions in both the Muslim and the American community.

According to Haddad et al (2006), the *halaqa* seems to show Muslim women's agency in contrast to the dominant discourse on Muslim women as oppressed by Islamic patriarchy. These women do not simply wait to hear the male interpretations of the religion through sermons, but they directly acquire knowledge using their interpretation of the holy texts and gain proficiency in and in-depth knowledge about Islam. By a closer study of texts and traditions, many Muslim women aim to have a voice in the reformulation of a gender-inclusive Islam (Haddad et al., 2006). As Haddad, Smith, and Moore (2006) argue that this is crucial in current efforts to reinterpret and to re-negotiate Islam. The examination of the *halaqa* in my study is not only significant for understanding the dominant American discourse on Muslims, but also within the male-dominated discourse in Islam. My research also examined to what degree the *halaqa* serves as a venue to re-affirming Muslim identity among these women and the ways this study group empowers women.

### Conviviality in Multicultural Life

According to Neal, Bennet, Cochrane, and Mohan (2013), conviviality is a possible frame for describing interactions across cultural differences as well as for transcending it. "The interest that concept of conviviality holds for the everyday multi-culture approach reflects its affective

associations, and here we want to consider the implications of taking those actions seriously” (Neal, Bennet, Cochran, & Mohan 2013: 316).

In a study of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. (Amescua-Chavez, 2016) explains that knowledge of the American way of life, including the nuances of social organization, the implicit norms of conduct, and most effective channels for political or social negotiations are social and cultural capital (Bourdieu) that can be accumulated and can be beneficial for navigating in a new reality. Migrants encounter and mingle with other migrants from different ethnicities and regions, which gives their cultural characteristics a new context in practice and generates new expressive forms that guarantee their survival through the space of conviviality. The process creates new forms of cultural practices. The intangible cultural heritage of immigrants has produced some familiarization by local populations of the immigrants’ cultural and social practices. In this process, both the immigrants’ cultures and local populations’ culture are being transformed (Amescua-Chavez, 2016). Furthermore, she explains that migrations are a social phenomenon that create diverse and dynamic contact zones where immigrants’ cultural practices generate the symbolic space needed to build community and break from isolation, encouraging spaces for political mobilization and organization (Amescua-Chavez, 2016). A comprehensive outlook on social reality must consider its negotiations and encounters as well as its frictions (Amescua-Chavez, 2016).

According to a study about multi-culturalism in England, increasingly migrant groups are relocating to suburban areas, new places where there is no or little history of multi-culture and ethnic tension correspondingly tend to be blank spaces in terms of the migratory settlement and the social capital of minority communities. The existing theoretical approach to multi-culture fails to adequately engage with the everyday lived reality of cultural differences in super-diverse

cities and spaces and stresses the importance of understanding how the structures and discourses filter through to the realm of everyday practice, exchange, and meaning-making. Neal, Bennet, Cochrane, and Mohan (2013) argue that instead of focusing on the tension and discord, the approach should reposition and focus on examples of coexistence with one another. People socialize and manage cultural differences and ethnic identities in more contingent, pragmatic, or convivial ways. A lot of negotiation of differences occurs at the very local level through everyday experiences and encounters (Neal et al., 2013). Thus, the focus needs to be on the agency of Muslims (and other minorities) in a pluralistic society.

In accordance with the studies of conviviality mentioned above and through my interviews with my research participants, I explored stories of support, help, kindness, and conviviality that showed mutual learning from close, direct, and daily contact between Muslim and non-Muslim in America. The studies of conviviality are relevant to my research on exploring the kinds of conviviality and interactions in which these DeKalb Muslim women engaged at a local-level as well as identity negotiation and how conviviality influences multi-culture life.

### Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an explanation of the theoretical/analytical frameworks and key concepts I used for my data collection and of the methods I used to acquire the data. This chapter also provides a review of key literature on diasporas and multicultural society. In the following chapter, I present my field data.



## CHAPTER 4

### DATA

I studied the experiences of Muslim women who live in DeKalb, Illinois, to answer my research question on how Muslim women negotiate and re-affirm their identity in the U.S., a pluralistic and secular country that, motivated by anti-terrorism narratives, has become hostile toward Muslims post-9/11. In this chapter, I present my field data by classifying my findings into three main themes: first, how Muslim women identify and represent themselves in American society and second, what are the Muslim women's daily negotiations or conviviality that helps them navigate their life in the U.S. and be accepted in their community. Third, is what is the DeKalb Islamic Center and what does the *halaqa* mean for these DeKalb Muslim women. I conclude this chapter with some preliminary analytical observations and provide a full and more nuanced analysis in the context of the theoretical/analytical frameworks in Chapter 5.

#### Muslim Women: Veil and Identity

Anna,<sup>6</sup> a white American woman, converted to Islam in 2006, one year after she married a Muslim man. Her husband did not ask her to convert to Islam, but after she studied the religion, she found that the religion was in accordance with values she already held, so she decided to convert. Anna practices daily prayer, fasts during Ramadan, and accepts religious

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<sup>6</sup> All name used in this study are pseudonyms

restrictions such as abstaining from consuming alcohol and pork. However, she believes that a veil is not required by Islam; instead, according to her understanding, veiling is a symbolic part of the religion and is more cultural. The veil is intended for women to not draw attention to themselves and is found in Muslim countries. However, if the woman wears a veil in the U.S. where Muslims are minorities, it has the opposite effect because people notice your presence. Anna relishes the freedom to choose when and to whom she wants to reveal her Muslim identity.

Anna explains that when some American people realize she is a Muslim, they comment that a smart white American should not choose a backward religion that oppresses women (Islam). These types of experiences have become the reason she mostly hides her identity as a Muslim and only reveals it when she sees the opportunity to enlighten and educate others about Islam. She understood that this kind of comment originates from ignorance and a lack of understanding about the religion of Islam. She also used to struggle to differentiate which practices come from the teaching of Islam and which are customs or personalities. Anna was ill treated by her Muslim husband, which led to their divorce. Her husband was having an affair and left the family, which has led Anna to think that the stereotype of Islam as a patriarchal religion that oppresses women is true. She said:

There's kind of personal thoughts that interfere with Islam that somehow is connected to him, not the core belief but some of the practices that happened during the marriage, that he have some idea about something and I am the victim of it, and I have to fight that is not from Islam, it come from him...differentiating between whether this problem has come from his culture...but mostly him. Because if he did the things that he did with me in his own culture, he will be completely rejected...very unacceptable. Now he's remarried and have the same problem (affair with other woman) people ...well he's not a Muslim anymore the way he was.

However, after receiving a lot of support from the Muslim community, especially Muslim men who tried to persuade her husband to come back to the family, she understood that her husband's

actions were due to his personality rather than his religion. Islam is so embedded in his character that she regarded all his actions as being based on his religious belief.

Another Muslim convert, Sally, also a white American woman, has a different interpretation of the veil. She converted to Islam in 2006 after studying the religion. She practices daily prayer, fasts during Ramadan, and practices veiling. She believes that Muslim women are required to cover their hair and body because of how she understands the Quran. Her daily outfit is a dark or black *abaya*.<sup>7</sup> However, she only wears this in places she is familiar with, such as her city and in big urban cities like Chicago. When she goes to smaller suburban places where there are not as many Muslims, she chooses to wear an outfit of a lighter color because she believes mainstream American media's false connection of Muslim women clad in black or dark *abayas* with Islamic terrorism. Therefore, she consciously chooses her outfit to avoid those images and hopes that her presence will not create discomfort for other people.

Maryam and Hajra are a mother and daughter who are originally from Palestine. Maryam spent her childhood and some of her adulthood in Palestine, and even though Palestine is a Muslim country, Muslim women have the freedom of choice when it comes to the veil. However, since Maryam was 14 years old, she has chosen to wear veils because, from her understanding of Islam, this is the right thing to do. After she married, her husband received a fellowship in the U.S., and the whole family moved to America in 2008. There was some concern about how American people would treat her because according to the media, America is not a friendly place for Muslims after 9/11. She considered wearing different kinds of head coverings besides veils, such as a hat, and even to stop wearing veils altogether before her departure. However, she decided to keep wearing her veil because her veil has become a part of

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<sup>7</sup> Abaya is a full-length outer garment worn by some Muslim women

her personality and she did not want to change her character just because of this relocation.

Although she believes the veil is required for Muslim women, she has not imposed wearing it on her daughters.

Her oldest daughter, Hajra, was 14 when they arrived in the U.S. She went to an American public school and was active in the school's sports activities. Even though Hajra spoke little English, nobody was interested in her origin. After a few years, she picked up English and eventually spoke without an accent. During her sophomore year, she went to Qatar to visit her family and decided to wear the veil after her trip. Her motivation came from seeing the majority of Muslim women in Qatar wearing the veil and still living their everyday life just like American women. After she decided to practice veiling, she received a lot of attention at school from teachers and fellow students asking about her country of origin, her religion, and her reason for wearing veils. According to Hajra, the questions were friendly and merely out of curiosity, so she happily responded. After she started to wear the veil, she continued to take part in sporting activities at school.

However, there is one activity she was not comfortable with even before she wore the veil, which is prom. She feels that this activity is against the religious values she learned from her parents. According to her belief, a girl and a boy should not have any intimate physical contact or relationship before marriage. Before she practiced veiling, she was having problems explaining the reason she refused to go to prom when asked by her friend. After she started wearing the veils, she did not receive invitations to prom anymore, which was more convenient for her.

Lina, a Muslim immigrant from Indonesia who has been living in the U.S. for 18 years, married a white American who converted to Islam before their marriage in 2001. Lina became an

American citizen in 2014. Lina began to practice veiling 2013; however, because she still had safety concerns, she opted for wide hats and scarves to cover her head instead of traditional veil worn by Muslim women. Lina explained that by doing so, she fulfills Islamic law to cover her body without showing her Muslim identity.

In 2016, when there was a rally to support LGBT after a mass shooting in a gay bar in Orlando, Lina deliberately wore a veil that could easily identify her as Muslim and joined the rally. As she expected, the crowd was not very welcoming; some people questioned her presence and asked her to go back to her country. She took the opportunity to speak at the rally and talk about LGBT rights. After the event, people approached, shook her hand, and thanked her. Some people confessed they were surprised that a Muslim, let alone a Muslim woman, was supporting LGBT rights. She agreed to be featured in a local newspaper because, besides expressing her empathy, she also wanted to show the American people that the stereotype that all Muslims are anti-LGBT is not true.

In 2014, she committed to wearing a regular veil after she returned from her *Hajj* (pilgrimage) trip. According to Lina, her journey strengthened her spiritual motivation and erased all her concerns about wearing the veil in America. Before she practiced veiling, she secretly performed daily prayer at work during her breaks, and none of her co-workers realized that she was Muslim. After she openly practiced veiling, her co-workers started to be curious about her religion, and she confidently informed them that she is a Muslim. Furthermore, she ventured to ask her supervisor for a space to perform her daily prayer. She told her manager that she always performs well at work and it would help her a lot if she had a designated spot to perform her daily prayer because she would not spend the time looking for a deserted place every time she needed to do her prayer. Her supervisor allocated a small room for her. Lina confessed

that she was relieved her friends at work accepted her for the way she is and that their attitude toward her remained the same. In fact, according to Lina, there was one positive change from one of her supervisors. Lina used to be mocked by this particular supervisor because she did not speak English fluently; however, after Lina started wearing veils, the supervisor stopped harassing her about her English and tried to avoid her altogether.

Another participant of this study is Irma, a student from Indonesia working on her doctoral degree. She has been living in the U.S. for five years. In her home country, her father was a local Islamic cleric who nurtured his children with strong Islamic values. She had gone to Islamic schools elementary level through college. Even though her father was an Islamic cleric, he never obligated her or her sisters to wear the veil. However, the veil was part of the uniform at an Islamic school she attended. When she was 14 and experiencing puberty, she decided to wear veils to cover her body because she was shy about her body change.

Vina, who has been living in the U.S. for 22 years decided to practice veiling approximately four years ago in 2015. She moved to the U.S. from Indonesia in 1997 after she married her first husband, a white American Muslim. She practices the essential requisites of the Islamic tenets, except veiling, even though she believes that the veil is a must for Muslim women. When 9/11 occurred, she was concerned for other Muslims who live in America as they were associated with the attack and received negative backlash in the aftermath. However, she did not have concern for her own wellbeing because aside from her close friends and family, other people did not realize she was a Muslim. She was privately practicing Islam and went to the mosque occasionally. She did not have a Muslim name and dressed like any regular American woman. She divorced her husband and married a white American man who converted to Islam prior their marriage. She decided to wear veils five years ago, a couple of years after her

second marriage. She did not wear veils before she found her second husband because after she divorced her first husband, she wanted to be married again, and she believed it would have been hard to meet someone here in America if she wore the veil. She did not have a problem seeing non-Muslim men as long as they were willing to convert to Islam if they wanted to marry her. She once jokingly asked her current husband if there was any chance he would marry her if she wore veils before they were married, and his response was he would not even want to know her. After she was content with her life with a loving husband, children, and a steady job, she decided it was time to wear veils. The one time that made her take off her veil was when she had to travel alone to Florida in 2016 after the ISIS attack in Paris. She was afraid that the attack might trigger a situation toward Muslims similar to 9/11 and decided to avoid the possibility by not wearing her veil during her trip.

The two North Sudanese women named Fatima, a naturalized U.S. citizen, and Zahra, the spouse of an international student I interviewed, both practice veiling. Fatima explained that in her country, women wear traditional attire, which is called *Thob*, a robe-like dress with long rectangle cloth worn to cover their head. Muslims and non-Muslims wear the traditional attire. The difference is how they wear the head cover. Non-Muslim women wear their head cover loosely, while Muslim women covered their hair completely. According to Fatima, Muslim women have the liberty to practice veiling or not in their country. Fatima started to practice veiling when she was in college. She explains that her primary motivation was not religious but to fit in with the majority of Muslim women students who practiced veiling. Although she started to wear veils to fit in with the majority of Sudanese Muslim students, today she still practices veiling because according to her it has become part of her identity. Zahra shared a story similar to Fatima's.

Not all Muslim women wear veils, and they have various reasons for their choices. For those who wear the veil, their identity as a Muslim woman is conspicuous. Those who do not wear the veils could easily conceal their Muslim identity if they wanted to. However, at some point, they need to reveal their Muslim identity because of Islamic food restrictions and prayers that she must perform five times a day. For example, Sari, an international student from Indonesia, explained that her fellow students discovered that she was a Muslim when they had a gathering at a restaurant and her friend wondered why she would not eat pork or drink alcohol. She explained that she could not consume alcohol and pork because she is a Muslim. Although during the interview she said there was no need for her to reveal her religious affiliation to anybody, by exposing her food restriction, she involuntarily revealed her Muslim identity.

Ira, another Indonesian Muslim student, told a different story of her experience. She came to the U.S. after she received a Fulbright scholarship to teach a foreign language. She wore veils at the time and recalls that despite what she had heard from the news that Americans were not friendly toward Muslims, she was confident and did not have any concerns about her appearance.

After she finished the program, she came back to the U.S. as a graduate student with a partial scholarship at Boston University. This time, she needed to find a part-time job because the partial scholarship was not sufficient to cover her living expenses. She found a job at the campus dining hall, but she did not get the job because according to them all positions were already filled. Because she was desperate for additional income, the next day she decided to take off her veil and went back. This time she got the job, and she has stopped wearing a veil ever since. She reflected that she had confidence to keep her veil the first time she lived in the U.S., because back then she did not have to be concerned about her financial condition. She also confessed that without her veil she has more freedom to express herself and does not have any



regrets about her decision to stop wearing veils since her safety and survival are her priority. Even after she married her husband who has a steady job, she said that she still prefers not to wear veils anymore. She does not feel that she is losing her Muslim identity or has become less Muslim because she stopped wearing veils. According to Ira, what makes her a Muslim is not how she dresses but more how she acts and the applications of good Islamic values, which according to her are universal.

In contrast, Kristie, a Mexican American who just converted to Islam two years ago, wants to practice veiling to identify herself as a Muslim, even though she has safety concerns, especially after the last presidential election. Kristie, unlike Ira, does not have to provide for herself financially because after she converted to Islam, she married an American Muslim man who has a steady job.

Aisyah is a Muslim immigrant from Bangladesh, and she has been living in the U.S. for 20 years. In 1998, she came to the U.S. to accompany her husband who was doing a fellowship at the University of Chicago. Aisyah has practiced veiling since she was in high school in Bangladesh. She graduated from American Islamic College (AIC) and became the initiator of the DeKalb women-only *halaqa*. As a result of her formal religious education, she is trusted to lead and teach at the *halaqa*. Aisyah has three daughters and two sons. Her three daughters attend DeKalb public schools, and all of them also wear veils. She explains that she never forced them to wear veils, but they did it voluntarily. However, she confessed that she has always taught them Islamic values and how to be a good Muslim, which includes the importance of modesty, in this case God's word on veils for Muslim women. Aisyah considers herself open-minded and gives her daughters the freedom to join any school activity, such as sports and choir. However, during the interview, it was revealed that she indeed had some restrictions. She said that she

would not let her daughters join cheerleading because, according to her, the costume and the movement required for this activity is against Islamic values of modesty and is not suitable for their morality.

As the above data show, Muslim women have agency not only in their decision to wear veils and how do they choose to wear it, but also in how they conduct their social relations in American society. According to Hussein (2016), what appears to be subservience of Muslim women is not always the case. Individual women can shape their roles to suit themselves by negotiating a path within the parameters of a patriarchal Islamic structure (Hussein, 2016). Muslim women living in the U.S. have been viewed as being oppressed by their patriarchal religion or being suspects of Islamic terrorism for the past 18 years. All of the participants I interviewed, who have lived in the U.S. since before 9/11 and those who moved to the U.S. after 9/11, were aware, to various degrees, of the hostile conditions, whether they mentioned it explicitly or inexplicitly, and adjusted their lives as Muslims in the U.S. accordingly. My findings also show that the dominant discourse that Muslim women who wear veils were oppressed is not true because the interviews reveal their choice to practice or not to practice veiling was fully their decision.

### Muslim Women's Conviviality

Noor came to the U.S. from Bangladesh five years ago to accompany her husband. Noor spends a lot of her time doing volunteer work. She volunteered at STEMfest at Northern Illinois University, the DeKalb Islamic Center's Sunday school, and Muslim Girl Scouts. She has made a lot of friends, both Muslim and non-Muslim, through these activities. One of the most memorable volunteering work experiences for Noor was when she cooked for the homeless with

the DeKalb Muslim Girl Scouts. She was glad that the event received a positive response from the homeless and the community and was happy she was able to contribute at the event.

Noor has a close friend, Alice, who is a white American woman. They met when Alice played piano in one of the university's common rooms. Noor praised how beautifully she played and introduced herself. According to Noor, the encounter led them to a friendly conversation. Noor found that Alice is a devoted Christian, and Alice understood from the beginning that Noor was a Muslim because Noor was wearing a veil. Since the encounter, they have become close and visit each other regularly to have discussions about religion, teach each other how to cook their traditional dishes, etc. Alice eventually introduced her sisters to Noor, and their families became friends. During her five years in the U.S., Noor has never encountered any bad experiences and says she feels accepted by the American community.

Sally recalled that after she converted to Islam and immediately practiced veiling, she noticed her co-workers slightly changed their attitudes toward her. They became more reserved because they were not sure if they could still interact the same way as before. However, after a while, their attitude toward her was as before because they observed that she listens to the same music, has the same sense of humor, and, most importantly, still does her job well.

Sally also said that after she became a Muslim, she had a better relationship with her parents. She learned that Islam strongly encouraged the believer to respect, to honor, and to treat their parents and elderly well, and she is striving to practice the teachings. Her parents, who at first questioned her decision to convert have slowly accepted it. Although it was expected, her parents were not very happy when she decided to marry an Indian Muslim student. However, they soon accepted her husband. Sally explains that even her grandparents "who live in the South" love her husband because compared to their other grandchildren, her husband is always

very attentive and polite and they often call and ask him to visit. The conviviality practiced by Sally and her husband has changed her family's understanding and attitudes toward Muslims. By showing them that she has become a better daughter and better grandchild, she shows them that Islam, as do many other religions, teaches good behavior and kindness and supports that Islam is not a terroristic religion like her family initially believed.

Meanwhile, Anna, who teaches multiculturalism to high school and college students, always has the same routine at the beginning of the semester. She reveals her identity as Muslim, which comes as a surprise for the students. She understands that she does not fit their stereotype of the Muslim woman because she is American and white. She then encourages each of her students to write two questions or comments anonymously about Islam. She then uses the opportunity to explain any misconceptions or stereotypes about Islam.

Hajra, together with her sister, deliberately became more involved in school sports when they were in high school to show that apart from their veil, they were just regular teenagers with passions and dreams like any regular American teenager. After she finished high school, Hajra was involved in student associations such as the Islamic Student Association and Interfaith Student Association. Currently, Hajra is pursuing her graduate degree in accountancy, and as a result of her social networks and interactions, she has several jobs lined up before she even graduates. Contrary to the results of Mir's (2014) study on Muslim women on campus, Hajra illustrates that not all Muslim women who wear veils seek isolation from the world or segregate themselves for comfort because they are marked with their easy visual identification of being Muslim.

In my study, some participants such as Hajra, Sari, and Lina did not have a problem joining social activities that sometimes took place at bars. Muslims are forbidden to consume

alcohol. Therefore, “good” Muslims normally do not go to bars. However, according to Hajra, Sari, and Lina, as long as they do not consume alcohol, it is fine for them to have meetings and other social activities in bars because they consider that as part of the American culture they have to accept. Because their non-Muslim friends are aware of their religious identity and religious restrictions, they help identify which drinks or food might contain alcohol or pork. Irma feels the same way about going to bars. However, she confessed that she prefers not to attend this kind of event if she considers it unimportant. According to Irma, she only attended this kind of event once during a conference in Washington, DC. when her colleagues met informally at an LGBT bar. According to these women, visiting bars does not mean they stop being Muslim, although they feel it would be more inclusive if the events were conducted in a “neutral” space.

Aisyah lives in a predominantly white neighborhood in DeKalb. Since she is a stay-at-home mother, her social interactions are mostly with her children’s teachers and members of the *halaqa*. However, she explains that her family has good social relationships with her neighbors. Her children are often invited for birthday parties, and the family invite each other for barbeques in the summer and send each other food. Sometimes the women have tea or coffee together and chat about anything, including religion. She has received a lot of questions about Islam and why she wears veils, which she is happy to answer. The neighbors also invite each other for different religious celebrations. She and her family were invited to a Christmas celebration, and she reciprocated by inviting them to an open house during *Eid al-Fitr* (a Muslim celebration marking the end of fasting months). She explained that one of her close neighbors, a Chinese Buddhist woman, often visits her for tea (she serves traditional Bangladeshi tea and sweets) and they have discussions about their religions. At the beginning of the interview, when asked about her experience as a Muslim woman who wore a veil during 9/11, she recalled that she never

experienced backlash as a student living in Chicago, even though most American media broadcast negative news about Muslims that associated all Muslims with terrorists and created misconceptions and misunderstanding about Muslims. She said that she never experienced any discrimination or harassment per se. She believes God will protect her if she keeps the faith that veils for Muslim women are God's word.

However, later during the interview, she said a few years ago she once experienced harassment. When she took her children to a public park, some non-Muslim American children said that her family should not come to the park, and they do not belong in America. She also revealed that her daughters who also practice veiling sometimes were teased and questioned by their friends about their veil at school. Aisyah seems to have regretted her confession and asked if it could be disregarded. She said:

It was all done by children, they're still young, so they don't know any better...please forget that I don't want to cause trouble. Most Americans are good, if you put that in your paper, people (American) will be upset if they read it. And I don't want to cause any trouble for the mosque.

As the only resource person at the *halaqa*, besides interpreting Quranic verses, she encourages her audience to do *dawah* (preaching Islamic values) to non-Muslim Americans by promoting Islamic values in every social interaction with them. She was concerned that the *halaqa* members would be reluctant to engage in social interaction with the American community if they heard about the experience mentioned above.

I recruited participants for this study mostly from members of the *halaqa*, but some of them were recruited from outside of *halaqa* membership, such as Fatima. I met Fatima at the DeKalb Islamic Center during a Friday prayer and approached her to participate in this study. She agreed to participate and set an appointment for an interview at her apartment. When I visited her for an interview, she invited her friend, Zahra, to take care of her three-month-old

baby while we were conducting the interview. She introduced me to Zahra who, later on, also participated in this study.

Fatima explained that she became a U.S. citizen after her husband finished his study and found a job in America. However, his position required him to work abroad and only come back every six months, so Fatima is practically living by herself with her three children. Her situation restricts her from having a social life. However, before she had her youngest baby, she used to join the International Café, a free group activity conducted by the DeKalb public library, where international people can meet and practice their conversational English skills. She was also taking some English classes at Kishwaukee College in Malta. She has made some American friends who continue to keep in touch once in a while, even though she stopped participating in these activities. Her English teacher from Kishwaukee College sometimes visits her, and they have Sudanese coffee over a chat. She reveals that her opinion of Americans in general changed after she came to live in the U.S. Based on the media that she followed in her country, she had the impression that America is not a friendly place for Muslims. Thus, she was concerned about how Americans would treat her. However, she was quickly put at ease because after her arrival, she and her family never experienced problems related to their religion and her appearance.

Zahra recounted a similar experience regarding her opinion of Americans in general. Zahra has been living in the U.S. for almost two years. Since both of her children are in elementary school, she has plenty of time for herself, hence her presence at Fatima's place to help Fatima take care of the baby. Zahra also joins social group activities held by the Network of Nations<sup>8</sup> biweekly to practice her conversational English skills. There were no specific topics for

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<sup>8</sup> Network of Nations a non-profit organization that links Northern Illinois University (NIU) and community internationals with each other, and with volunteers from churches in the DeKalb Co., Illinois area. The mission of this organization is to build bridges of love and friendship between internationals and community churches. Many

the English conversation practice, and it is carried out in informal settings. An American friend she met at the Network of Nations picks her up for these activities since she does not drive. According to Zahra, all Americans who are in this Network of Nations are very friendly and treat her nicely even though she is Muslim, and she enjoys the friendship offered from the people of this organization. During her two years in DeKalb, she says she has felt accepted by the community, which has made her think that not everything she heard from the media in her country about Americans being hostile toward Muslims was true because her experiences have proved otherwise.

#### DeKalb Muslim Women-only *Halaqa*

As studies on Muslim women mentioned in the background of my research have shown, Muslim women no longer accept the idea that Islam promotes injustice and mistreatment of women. They believe that the current concept of an ideal Muslim woman is based on patriarchy's construction in the name of religion. However, Muslim women are challenging the values of a patriarchal society in which the wife, daughter, and sister owe obedience to men, who as husband, father, and brother exclusively hold power. In this era, the number of Muslim women who are educated, travel the world, and hold power and responsibility is increasing (Anwar, 2005).

Aside from the regular education, motivated by the belief that existing Islamic laws are not conducive to their rights, these Muslim women want more understanding of and adherence to

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internationals face the challenges of cultural adjustment, language difficulties, isolation and loneliness. Approximately 1300 international scholars and students along with their families are enrolled at NIU every year. NofN is committed to extending hospitality and practical assistance and offering them a caring community for friendship and cross-cultural understanding.



Islamic principles (Al-Hibri, 2005). The emergence of women's religious study groups (*halaqa*) in many parts of the country has given Muslim women an important role in the education of their children and other women. These women-only gatherings not only serve to promote direct religious knowledge and deepening of faith, but also serve as a support group for women who learn from each other and give each other encouragement (Haddad et al., 2006). The DeKalb Muslim women-only *halaqa* is important to observe from this perspective on how Muslim women find liberation, truth, and justice within their faith and to study how Muslim women renegotiate their positions in both Muslim and American community.

Muslims are encouraged to be able to read the Quran and conduct daily prayer in Arabic; however, Aisyah is Bangladeshi, thus Arabic is not her first language. She is trusted to be the source person instead of women who came from Arab speaking countries such as Saudi Arabia, Palestine, or Sudan. In those countries, especially Saudi Arabia, it is not the reading but the memorizing of the Quran that is emphasized. This phenomenon mostly occurred in other countries that do not use Arab language. These Muslims were likely to memorize verses from the Quran without necessarily understanding the meaning. Therefore, Aisyah is considered as more knowledgeable because she has had a formal education on the religion of Islam through her studies at American Islamic College. Fifteen to 20 women usually attend the *halaqa*. It starts with the recitation of one of the verses from the Quran and continues with Aisyah explaining the interpretation and meaning. From my observation, this activity is more like a lecture than a discussion. Sometimes women who speak Arabic will correct the pronunciation of some Arabic words or help her to explain the meaning of the words, but never the interpretations, to the audience. This activity lasts between one hour to one-and-a-half hours. After that, the women enjoy a potluck dinner and chat—some of them stay for a few more hours. When I attended the

*halaqa*, some women stayed until 10:00 p.m. They considered 6:00 p.m. a good time because by that time women were usually finished with their daily routines. The participants of the *halaqa* are DeKalb Muslim women from diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity and origin, occupations, and age. Some women brought their children to the *halaqa*. The girls who were old enough joined in and listened, while the younger children, including the boys, played together in a different room. Because the *halaqa* is conducted in English, only Muslim women who understood English attended. English was the shared language for all these women's different ethnic backgrounds.

During the activity, Aisyah's husband, who is home during the activity, always stayed in his room and did not join the dinner. Although he always cooks a special dish for this potluck dinner (special recipe of Bangladeshi chicken biryani), he usually waited until everyone left or Aisyah brought some food to his room. During the potluck, the women talked about their daily life and shared information about job vacancies for women who were looking or the best schools for their children.

Kristie, a recent convert, claimed that she could learn about Islam by reading books or watching YouTube and other online sources, but she still needed a real person who understands the religion for guidance. The *halaqa* is the place for her to deepen her knowledge about Islam, and most importantly, it gives her a sense of sisterhood and belonging. She also said that she has connected with other converts through this *halaqa*, which is very important because they can share their experiences of being a convert, such as how to deal with their family and friends regarding their new religion.

Muslim women who only attend *halaqa* occasionally considered this activity a social activity rather than a learning experience about Islam. Maryam explained that there is nothing

new for her in the *halaqa* because she already learned what is being taught there in her childhood. In Palestine, her country of origin, Islam was taught in schools and was a daily practice in the family and community. She occasionally attends the *halaqa* to socialize when she is not busy. Other participants such as Irma, Ira, and Sari also attend DeKalb Muslim *halaqa* to socialize. Because of their busy schedules as students, they do not feel the need to learn more about Islam from the *halaqa*. However, if they were invited to *halaqa* held by the Indonesian community, they were most likely to attend for social reasons, such as to meet other Indonesians. These activities always serve traditional food, so they also use this occasion to quench the yearning for an Indonesian dish. For these participants, *halaqa* is considered a socio-cultural activity instead of a religious activity. The DeKalb Muslim women-only *halaqa*, which is usually held in the leader's house instead of the mosque (which is traditionally dominated by Muslim men) may also have relevance with a view to Muslim women's agency.

### Concluding Remarks

Post 9/11, Muslim women have been portrayed both as victims and suspects by their fellow Americans, leading to situations in which they consistently had to justify and explain themselves. These Muslim women have been put in a paradoxical situation in which they have been silenced but, on the other hand, also forced to speak out. However, instead of giving Muslim women their voice, Western politicians, journalists, feminists, and male Muslim community leaders often speak on Muslim women's behalf or in some cases only particular Muslim women have been given a chance to speak on particular issues (Hussein, 2016). Muslim women are viewed as victims of a patriarchal religion that is oppressive toward women. However, they have also been viewed as potential terrorists. The fear of terrorism is acute post

9/11 and has been revived by subsequent attacks in other parts of the world such as Bali, Indonesia; Madrid, Spain; London, England; and Boston, Massachusetts in the U.S. Alongside the fear of Islamic terrorism, Islam is viewed as a cultural hazard because its values do not follow Western values.

After presenting my data in this chapter and providing some analytical observations, in the following Chapter, I turn to a thorough and nuanced analysis of these data based on the analytical frameworks from Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

Muslim women in DeKalb displayed examples of coexistence with one another to eradicate or minimize the risk of ethnic tension through the practice of conviviality. Conviviality is based in everyday experiences, encounters, and interactions across cultural differences (Neal et al., 20135). This study highlighted the significance of conviviality in multicultural life because people socialize and manage cultural differences and ethnic identity in more contingent and pragmatic ways and negotiate difference at the local level through everyday experiences and encounters.

#### Diaspora Study

##### DeKalb Muslim Women: Diaspora and Globalization

From Appadurai's (1998) concept of scapes, I found that the only scape applicable to my data is ethnoscape. Ethnoscape according to Appadurai, is

the landscape of person who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. (p 52)

Ethnoscape refers to the increased mobility of individuals around the world, which has led to increased encounters between Muslim immigrants, especially with the change of the U.S. immigration law in 1965 that allowed more non-white people to immigrate to America,

including Muslims from Asia and Africa. A city such as DeKalb has attracted international students from all over the world, including Muslim students. Some of them, such as Fatima, Hajra, and Maryam, who first came as international students, eventually became American citizens.

The Muslim population in DeKalb has grown over the years and needed a mosque as a place of worship. The existence of the Muslim community and the Islamic Center in DeKalb have changed the traditional understanding of the American community. Following Appadurai's (1996) framework, globalization has created the very diversity of the U.S. population. America has become a post-national space and a country of immigrants that faces the challenge of diasporic pluralism (Appadurai, 1996). Mosques and Islamic centers have become part of American landscapes, and Muslim women who wear veils have become part of American society. Today, Muslim women who wear veils, such as Maryam, can be found teaching in American schools, fostering interactions between American and Muslim cultures.

People who migrated to the U.S. from many different countries prompted by globalization to find a job, to study, or as refugees have become the diaspora. Their connection to their geographical place of origins has ruptured, which has created both discontinuity and uniqueness, and their ideas of ethnicity have become salient (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Tindongan, 2011). The DeKalb Islamic Center has connected multiple dispersed Muslim diasporic communities into one Muslim community. The Muslims who came from different countries were no longer able to practice Islam the way they did in their home country. There were variations in the way the Muslims conducted their prayer, such as the forms (where to put their hands, how to sit, etc.), or whether to say "Amen" out loud or not. Some differences reach ideological levels, such as what is *haram* (prescribed by Islamic law) and what is *halal* (prepared

in the manner prescribed by Islamic law) regarding food for consumption. When there is a potluck for a religious celebration, all Muslims who participate comply with the *halal* definition agreed to within the community. This means they need to acquire *halal* meat even when they usually do not buy it for their daily consumption.

Besides having to adjust to other different Islamic traditions, these Muslims in the U.S. also had to adapt to American culture. Based on Sari, Hajra, Irma, and Lina's experiences as Muslims who do not drink alcohol, they sometimes go to bars to socialize or have informal meetings with fellow Americans. They regarded this social activity as part of the American culture in which they need to participate to be accepted by American society. They said they did this as a strategy to live in America but did not consume alcohol, so they would not break Islamic law. This strategy is in accordance with Tindongan's (2011) study, which explains that living remotely from their cultural/religious origins impacts Muslims' choices in their way of life, such as which traditional or religious values they choose to implement or disregard to cope/adapt to an alien social environment. In exploring these strategies and coping mechanisms, it is essential to examine how Muslim women manage multiple identities. Identities as Muslims and as Americans are not always compatible. Identity negotiation comes as a result of stereotyping, misunderstandings, and limitations put on them by the larger mainstream U.S. society (Tindongan, 2011). Lina's choice of headcovers when she met her American friends at bars and Sally's consideration to wear lighter colored outfits when she goes to places where there are not many Muslims shows that Muslim women strategize and negotiate their identity.

According to Gupta and Fergusson (1998), the displacement of people is not only experienced by people who have been geographically moved, but is also experienced by people who remain in their familiar and ancestral places because the nature of their relationship to place

has changed and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture is broken (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

This statement is true, especially for American women who converted to Islam, such as Kristie. Kristie explained that her interaction with her female professor who is a Muslim in college motivated her to learn more about Islam. Based on the mainstream media's portrayal of Islam, she had the impression that Muslims were related to terrorism or were at least pro-violence and the women were oppressed. However, she saw that her Muslim professor, who also practiced veiling, was smart, independent, and most importantly, against violence. The contradiction between media portrayal and the reality of the Muslim women she encountered in college made her change her opinion on Islam and became her motivation to learn about religion.

At universities such as NIU, school events often serve *halal* food or at least do not serve pork to accommodate Muslim students. In recent years, the consideration of *halal* food does not only occur at NIU but also occurs in the DeKalb school district where food that contains pork is no longer served to accommodate Muslim students. *Halal* food or no-pork in school lunches is a positive change for Muslim parents who live in DeKalb because they do not have to worry about their children's lunch, as described by participants of this study who have children attending DeKalb's school district.

Like in Sharify-Funk's (2008) study on diaspora, the Muslim diaspora in DeKalb has experienced the development of tension between two competing worldviews: the traditional/religious worldview and the modernist/secular one. Sharify-Funk argues that a traditional/religious normative system is a past-oriented system of meanings that appeals to historical conceptions of Muslim identity. Furthermore, he explains that the conventional normative system has derived its meanings and values from the past, reflects a patriarchal ethos,



and accentuates traditional male virtues. This is in contrast, the modernist paradigm, which is mostly a future-oriented system of meaning that highlights the agency of the individual in the negotiation of normative standards and the construction of social identity and meaning (Sharify-Funk, 2008). From my study of the DeKalb Muslim women diaspora, I have found that changes occurred in both the Muslim and American societies: American Muslims negotiate their identity and strategize their way to become part of American culture while adhering to their religious values, and *halal* food has become a part of American culture in DeKalb.

Paralleling Hall's (1990) study, I also discovered that Muslims might experience more freedom to practice their religion compared to their home country and at the same time fear their children will become Westernized and lose their traditional values. In my study, I found that these concerns were stronger for participants who had daughter(s). Aisyah, who has three daughters attending DeKalb public schools, has placed some restrictions on the school activities her daughters are allowed to participate in. While she let them join choirs that sometimes sing Christmas songs, she does not allow them to participate in activities that require revealing costume or excessive display of body movement such as cheerleading. She considered cheerleading as being against Islamic values of modesty. However, she admitted that she does not have any restrictions for her sons. Aisyah's decision regarding her children's activities is also in accordance with Gupta and Ferguson's (1992) study, which found that people who live in diaspora and moved to Western countries experienced a lifestyle constrained by their adopted countries while trying to retain some remnant of the old ways in their home country.

### Cultural Identity and Diaspora of DeKalb Muslim Women

Hall's (1990) definition of cultural identity is culture shared between people who have a shared history and ancestry. Within these terms, everyday historical experiences and shared cultural codes provide oneness, continuous frames of reference, and reflected meaning. Muslims who came from different countries of origin and different demographic backgrounds only shared Islam as their common religious belief, yet they were assigned a cultural identity as Muslim by non-Muslim Americans without considering their differences, as highlighted in the previous chapter.

The homogenization of Muslims is problematic because according to Hall (1990), aside from the similarities, cultural identity is also shaped by critical points of profound and significant differences caused by ruptures and discontinuities which create. As highlighted in the previous chapter, these DeKalb Muslim women have different views and different ways of practicing Islam. They expressed different views of modesty suggested by the Quran, hence their different interpretations of the veils. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between culture and religion and recognize that religion is only one aspect of culture. However, most of the time it is difficult to recognize the difference between religion and cultural tradition because cultural assumptions and values often masquerade as religious ones. Thus, both Muslims and non-Muslims often believe that some cultural values are religious. In some cases, cultural customs have often been introduced as an aspect of Islamic jurisprudence, as in various Muslim countries (Al-Hibri, 2005).

Based on my data, there are two different reactions of these Muslim women regarding Islam as a cultural identity. First, Islam as a cultural identity has given them a sense of oneness and of camaraderie that unifies them as American Muslim women facing similar concerns and

problems. Second, Islam as cultural identity has created problems because it can trigger negative treatment such as racialization and discrimination. These Muslim women who viewed Islam in terms of cultural identity saw religion as a unifying factor and as a source of social support. The DeKalb Muslim women-only *halaqa*, for example, has become a melting pot in which Muslim women with different backgrounds in DeKalb can share their religious knowledge to strengthen their faith and to socialize with other Muslims. However, as Hall (1990) suggests, immigrants in a host country are people of a diaspora, which he defines as the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity. Regardless of the diversity of cultural identity, the dominant culture views the diaspora with no common origins as very much the same: as the marginal, the underdeveloped, or in other words, the “other” (p. 228). With this mindset and without considering their individualities, all Muslims are categorized as other and thus do not qualify for or have equal rights with the rest of American society.

The inequality created by the homogenization of Muslims has made some Muslim women believe that the categorization of all Muslims into one cultural identity is a disadvantage. According to Ira and Anna, based on their experience, American people judge them for their religious identity instead of their capabilities and/or their personalities—hence Ira’s decision to stop wearing veils to find a job, Anna’s strategy to reveal her Muslim identity before she begins teaching multiculturalism, and Vina’s decision to wear veils after she found a spouse. Ira assumed that she struggled to find a job because she was wearing veils; her assumption was confirmed because when she applied for the same position at the same place without a veil, she was immediately hired.

Islam as a religious belief has been imposed as a cultural identity on every Muslim, especially in America, which has led to the racialization of Muslims. Post-9/11, the dominant

discourse represented Muslim women as either oppressed or oriented toward terror. Thus, American Muslim women have found themselves continuously negotiating their position in the larger American society. Based on these DeKalb Muslim women's experiences, Muslim women who wear veils as religious signifiers were more conscious about their religious identity compared to Muslim women who do not practice veiling.

As illustrated in Table 1 in Chapter 3, Muslim women who did not wear veils did not practice conviviality as an effort to be accepted by their fellow Americans. The reason for this was that the American mainstream viewed Muslim women in a dichotomized way—good Muslim/bad Muslim. Muslim women who wear veils are regarded as religiously pious women who stubbornly adhere to their false consciousness on behalf of an aggressive patriarchal Muslim ideology, while Muslim women who confine their religious practice to private spaces and prioritized their identity as national citizens rather than their ethnoreligious identity were regarded as good Muslims (Hussein, 2016). Therefore, Muslim women who wear veils had to constantly prove through their conviviality that they were good Muslims who were neither oppressed or supported terrorism.

## Multicultural Study

### Muslim Women's Conviviality

The process of interactions between different immigrant's cultures and the dominant American culture creates new forms of cultural practices for immigrants, which produces some familiarization of the local populations with immigrant's cultural and social practices. In this process, both the immigrants' cultures and local populations' culture are being transformed. In

suburban areas or places where there is little or no history of multiculturalism, there is a potential risk of ethnic tension between immigrants and the local community. Instead of focusing on the tension and discord, the approach should be repositioned and focus on examples of coexistence with one another to eradicate or minimize the risk of ethnic tension.

People socialize and manage cultural differences and ethnic identity in more contingent, pragmatic or convivial ways. A lot of negotiation of difference occurs at the local level through everyday experiences and encounters. Thus, the focus needs to be on the agency of Muslims and other minorities in a pluralistic society achieved through the practice of conviviality as an everyday experience, encounter, and interaction across cultural differences (Neal et al., 2013).

The social interactions and multicultural activities in which these DeKalb Muslim women engages at a local and individual level reveal stories of support, help, kindness, and conviviality, which shows mutual learning from close, direct, and daily contact between Muslims and non-Muslims in America. Maryam explained that when she first came to the U.S., her family was accommodated by a Christian American family that she met from the International Café. Her experience living with an American family left a deep impression on her and her family; she said:

Can you believe, they let us stay until we got our place. Imagine that both of our family have three children, so ten people living in the same house for a month. They have a very big house and a very big heart to do such a thing for us. Whatever negative things the media said about Americans or Christians I don't believe it.

The hospitality of her host family contributed to Maryam's attitudes toward Americans in general. Zahra, who met Americans mostly by joining the Network of Nations activities, also expressed the same opinion of Americans. Meanwhile, Lina said she tried to do her job well to show that Muslim women have the same capability as others. Noor does a lot of volunteering in

the NIU and DeKalb community to engage with the American non-Muslim community in DeKalb. The everyday life activities practiced by Muslim women are effective for building social relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the DeKalb community. Through these practices of conviviality, these Muslim women were providing alternative discourse on Islam, which can change the way Americans in DeKalb view Muslim women and vice versa.

Based on my observations of the DeKalb Muslim women-only *halaqa*, I argue that the women-only study circle also provides an alternative discourse that challenges the dominant discourse within Islam as a male dominant religion. It challenges the power of men in the religion who have marginalized women in Islam. Based on who the members chose as their leader—Aisyah, who graduated from American Islamic Academy—the women understood the importance of formal religious education for the legitimacy of the content in the teaching within the *halaqa*. The DeKalb *halaqa* corresponds to Anwar's (2005) study, which explained that Muslim women no longer accept the idea that Islam promotes injustice and mistreatment of women. The belief that the current concept of the ideal Muslim woman is based on patriarchy's construction in the name of religion. These Muslim women are challenging the values of a patriarchal society in which the wife, daughter, and sister owe obedience to men who exclusively hold power as husband, father, and brother.

#### DeKalb Muslim Women's Agency

According to Ortner (2006), agency is the power to act within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force that are possessed by social actors. However, agency is not free or unfettered; instead agency is influenced by social relations and interactions with others and includes relations of power, inequality, and competition (Ortner 2006). As illustrated by the data

in the previous chapter, there were various levels and forms of agency exercised by these DeKalb Muslim women. Each participant in this study had intentionally chosen whether to hide or to reveal their religious identity, depending on their goals. Some participants decided to hide their Muslim identity to avoid discrimination or racialization. For these participants, religious identity belongs to the private domain. However, they did not hesitate to reveal their Muslim identity to serve their goals, such as to educate others about Islam, or when they want to avoid discrimination, such as when they are doing their daily prayer at work or eating *halal*, or pork-free food, in gatherings or meetings.

Meanwhile, some participants who decided to publicly display their religious identity by wearing veils confronted the consequences in ways that suited them. Some participants decided to wear veils to deliberately proclaim that even though they socialize with other Americans, they have different standards of modesty and different religious values to uphold. For example, Hajra chose to avoid proms but was still active in school sports. Most participants who have daughter(s) claimed that even though they believed veils are strongly encouraged for Muslim women, they would not force their daughter to wear it. According to Irma, she would accept if her daughter had a different view on veils because her daughter was raised in America, which is very different from Irma, who was raised in thick Islamic cultures in Indonesia. According to Irma, different views on the interpretations of religion, especially on veils for Muslim women, is not an important issue; for her, the real issue is whether women have freedom to choose to practice what they believe. Intentionality directed toward definite goals is an important component of agency according to Ortner (2006). Therefore, according to Ortner's concept of agency, these DeKalb Muslim women have agency in their decisions on how to present their religious identities.

However, while agency is universal, the distribution of agency is not equal, and some people have more, and others have less depending on their position in social relations, their background culture, their life experiences, and other external factors (Ortner 2006). These factors are also reflected in variation among these DeKalb Muslim women in the way they exercised their agency. Referring to the data in Table 1, most participants who did not wear veils or stopped wearing veils are Indonesian, whereas the participants who practiced veiling mostly came from Sudan, Palestine, Bangladesh and America. Their different decisions regarding the veil could be influenced by the culture of their country of origins. Although Indonesia has the biggest Muslim population in the world, Islam spread to Indonesia much later compared to Sudan or Bangladesh. In countries such Palestine, Bangladesh, and Sudan, local culture was incorporated into Islamic practice, particularly with regard to traditional dress such as *Shari* and *Thob*. The fact that Indonesia's government used to ban veils might also contribute to Indonesian Muslim women's view on veils. Conversely, American women who converted to Islam mostly learned from or have close social relationships with Muslims from Arab countries, which may have influenced how they practice Islam. The agency practiced by these DeKalb Muslim women regarding veiling practices are in accordance with Ortner's arguments on agency where people's goals or desires have been shaped by their culture. Therefore, while agency may seem to be a property of individuals, agency is structured by a set of rules and ideologies underlying the culture to which an individual belongs (Ortner, 2006).

#### Dominant Discourse and Alternative Discourse of DeKalb Muslim Women

Foucault's (1980) arguments of power and power relations state that power is not the ability to force people to do things through violence or threat of violence. Power also does not



reside in individuals, classes, and those who have access to the means of production. In contrast, power works as an ongoing subjugation process that dictates people's behaviors, governs gestures, etc., and is an aspect of all social relationships. This pervasive power is inherent in discourse because what is true is determined by the dominant discourse (Lewellen, 2003). The dominant discourse is a discourse that was created and serves as a political commodity for the power holder or the elites (Foucault, 1980). Alternative discourse is subordinated and subjugated discourse exists outside the dominant discourse because they do not fit the truth set by the power holder (Lewellen, 2003). According to Foucault (1980), dominant discourse is subject to re-appropriation, reversibility, and re-utilization and can be countered or criticized by an alternative, a less popular knowledge that has been regarded as inadequate by the power holders. The marginalized or minority can challenge the dominant discourse because rather than a systematized body of knowledge, discourse is a product of every condition and activity, which is subject to continuous change and individual agency (Lewellen, 2003).

Since 9/11, the dominant discourse on Muslims has negatively impacted the lives of Muslims in the U.S., especially Muslim women. The dominant discourse in the U.S., post-9/11, has viewed Muslim women as an oppressed group who needed to be saved or liberated. This view has been reinforced by mainstream media and has become viewed as legitimate knowledge. As a result of the negative imagery of Muslims, a common understanding of Islam emerged which viewed Muslim identity as singular, monolithic, oppressed, one dimensional, and oriented toward terror. The events of 9/11 have not only altered the cultural landscape of U.S. mainstream communities but has also changed the way Muslim people self-identify and how others identify them. This condition has forced them to negotiate multiple identities as well as engendered individual efforts to counter the dominant discourse.

Although veils have become a religious signifier for Muslim women, not all Muslim women wear veils for various individual reasons. However, there is an assumption that Muslim women who practice veiling are forced to wear veils and are oppressed. Sally explained that when she encounters people who have negative comments about her veils and her *abaya*, she engages them in conversations, relaying that it was her choice to dress according to her religious belief. She explained that American people assumed she was a foreigner because of her appearance, but as soon as she answered their comments, people realized that she was an American. She said even though she wears veils, she is still able to take advantage of her “white privilege” to educate people about Islam. Based on her experiences, the negative comments sometimes lead to a 20-minute dialogue about Islam because people are curious about her reasons for having converted as a white American woman. Anna also takes advantage of “white privilege” to educate her students about Islam, although outside the classroom she would rather not publicly reveal her religious identity. Lina also challenged the dominant discourse on Muslim women when she decided to participate in the rally to support LGBT. Maryam, who teaches Arab-speaking students at a DeKalb elementary school, also received questions about veils and Islam from her fellow teachers, which she gladly answered. These Muslim women are providing alternative discourses on Islam, Muslim women, and veils through their activities and positions.

Moreover, some Muslim women are also providing alternative discourse through their actions without verbal explanations. For example, Muslim women such as Ira, Sari, Irma and all Muslim women who came to the U.S. to study proved the assumption that Muslim women are oppressed wrong. Oppressed women do not travel abroad to earn an academic degree. Aisyah, Noor, Fatima, and Zahra who are friendly and engage in social interactions with their neighbors

and the non-Muslim American community through various social activities might also be transforming the dominant discourse.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### Summary of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

Mainstream media has mainly focused the spotlight on extremist Islamic ideologies and subsequent terrorist acts. A central aspect of this ideology includes forcing extreme interpretations of Islamic law on all Muslim women, which has led to the dominant discourse in Western countries that Muslim women are an oppressed group who need to be liberated. As a result of the negative imagery of Muslims, Muslim women are also associated with terrorism. These conditions have not only altered the cultural landscape of U.S. mainstream communities, but they have also changed the way Muslim people self-identify and how others identify them. This condition has forced them to negotiate multiple identities.

Through this study I found that the ways these women negotiate and re-affirm their Muslim identity have been influenced by two factors: internal factors such as religion, culture of origin and their values and external factors such as socio-economic status and discourses about Muslim women. Regarding veils, my study shows that some participants decide not to wear veils or only wear veils when they are “mentally” ready because they did not want their actions to be associated with their religion, which might have generated a negative image of Muslims in general. This mindset has occurred because Islam as a religion is so embedded in their personal identities that it also became their cultural identity. The participants also revealed that they would rather keep their religious identity private because they wanted to be valued based on their

capability or personality rather than being judged for their religious identity. While Muslim women who decide to wear veils in America put themselves at potential risk for discrimination and racialization, they considered their religious values as being worth the risks. This is in accordance with the concept of agency: all social actors' actions and goals are influenced by their diasporic identities. What seemed to be Muslim women's individual decisions were actually culturally and socially constructed (Ortner, 2006).

Each Muslim woman had a different view and interpretation on religious values. These interpretations have been influenced by a set of rules and knowledge that became their world view or discourse according to Foucault (1980). These DeKalb Muslim women exercised their agency through their words and actions. For example, Anna, who educated her students about Islam, and Sally, who engaged in conversations with people who made negative comments about her veils, were verbally presenting alternative discourse about Muslim women. While participants such as Hajra, Lina, and Noor provided alternative discourse by exceling in sports, their jobs, or being involved in the larger American community.

Through my study, I found a common pattern among Muslim women who wore veils in that they altered the color of the dress or how they wore the veils in an effort to avoid the image of terrorists portrayed by the media. However, the thoughts behind their actions were not based on safety or harassment concerns. Instead it was because they did not want to create discomfort for their fellow Americans in their surrounding community. They were aware that American culture associates Muslim women who wear the all black *burqa* with terrorists. The Muslim women who do not wear clothing that identify their religion also hide their Muslim identity for the comfort of others.

Muslim women who have a steady job and income and, thus, were financially and socio-economically secure were more confident with their Muslim identity. This confidence also showed through Muslims who were American-born and naturalized-citizens, which might be attributed to their knowledge that they have equal rights within the larger American society. Meanwhile, the Muslim women who were students or spouses of foreign students and those who were less secure financially tended to keep their Muslim identity private.

Based on this study, these DeKalb Muslim women enjoy American values such as democratic governance, freedom of speech, and independence. However, they were indifferent to aspects of American culture that were not in accordance with Islamic values such as sexual permissiveness, especially among the youth. The American Muslim women found a way to practice Islam to Muslim society by retaining their religious beliefs and cultural identities and providing an alternative discourse to American society about Muslim women through the practice of conviviality and an alternative interpretation of Islam.

Regarding the variation in these women's negotiation of their Muslim identities based on whether the women were American born, naturalized Americans, immigrants who are permanent residents, or international students, my study found these factors influenced their goals, strategies, and negotiation. The Muslim Women who were permanent residents, naturalized citizens, or American citizens negotiated their identity (by not wearing veils or altering their veils) to practice conviviality to integrate into and be accepted by the larger American community. However, international students or spouses of international students who only lived in the U.S. for a limited time did not practice conviviality.

This research suggests that not all Muslim women who live in the U.S. have a goal to be accepted by the larger American community. Some participants had a different purpose, such as

going back to their country as soon as they finished their studies or supporting their husbands without necessarily thinking about their religious identity. This study also suggests that immigration status had a greater influence on these Muslim women's strategies for negotiating their identity rather than their physical appearance as they lived their lives as a minority in the larger American community.

### Findings in Relation to the Existing Literature

The literature about the Muslim diaspora in the U.S. explains that Islam has become a cultural identity that assumes all actions performed by Muslims are based on or related to their religion, which has led to the homogenization of Muslims. However, the reality shows that these Muslim women in DeKalb are not homogenous. From the *halaqa* activity alone, there were Muslim women from at least six different countries of origin: America, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine. More Muslims from different countries, such as Albania, Egypt, Morocco, Malaysia, India, and Mexico, are members of the larger DeKalb Muslim community. Islam is only a part of a cultural identity. These Muslim immigrants are people who live in a diaspora in which their diasporic culture has shaped their identity aside from their religion. Therefore, it is impossible to define a Muslim woman merely by her religion.

These DeKalb Muslim women, empowered by their diaspora identity, utilized their unique cultural identity to present alternative discourses about Muslim women. For example, Muslim women such as Fatima, Noor, and Aisyah introduced their traditional food to their American fellows, followed by conversation that has led to deeper understanding about their personalities and cultural identities.

My study shows that the larger American society in DeKalb, Illinois, was not hostile toward Muslims, contrary to the studies presented in Chapter 2. From my interviews, all participants seldom experienced discrimination or racism from the non-Muslim Americans in DeKalb. This may be attributed to the presence of a large number of international students who study at NIU and many social activities held by some local community organizations such as Network of Nations and International Café. By bridging the differences with various multicultural activities, these organizations contribute to the understanding of each community. Organizations such as the Network of Nations and International Café provide an opportunity for DeKalb Muslim women to interact with American society and other international communities in DeKalb. I also found that conviviality practiced by Muslim women on a daily basis through engagement with the larger American community in DeKalb has a positive effect on multicultural life.

The literature on Muslim women has argued that Muslim women consider the veil as less important than matters such as Islamic Law and practices (Al-Hibri, 2005). In accordance with Al-Hibri's study, I also found that the dominant discourse on Muslim women in America has forced Muslim women to focus on constantly negotiating their identity. In this case, the *halaqa* has been a valuable vessel for the empowerment of these DeKalb Muslim women, where Muslim women can discuss their own interpretation of the religion.

### Shortcomings of the Research

My research started in mid-December 2018, concurrent with Winter break, Christmas, and the New Year holidays. Due to the shortness of time and the holidays, there were not enough people to interview for each different category. For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, I only



found four U.S.-born Muslim women who live in DeKalb and was only able to interview three of them, which reduced my sample size to 15 from the planned 18. Due to the limited time of this study, the small sample size may not reflect the diversity of the Muslim population in DeKalb. This study was conducted only with participants who speak English and Indonesian, which also contributed to a limited sample.

### Relevance of the Study for Future Research

Based on this study, I learned that despite the dominant discourse that has put Muslim women in a negative light as being oppressed, submissive and backwards, America has given them the opportunity to enjoy freedom of religion, free speech, and more independence to practice Islam the way they want. The mere existence of Muslim women professionals in America and other Western countries counters the assumption that Islam is a backward religion that oppresses women. However, in some predominantly Muslim countries where patriarchal cultures might seep into Islamic jurisprudence, there is more work to be done to change the condition.

The basic principle of Islam is to believe that the primary source of Islamic law is the Quran with the *hadith* (a narrative record of sayings and customs of the prophet Muhammad and his companions) as the supplement. *Ijma'* (consensus) and *ijtihad*, which is based on rules and logic as well as religious texts, are also important sources of Islamic law. Islam does not have clergy or an ecclesiastic structure, instead each individual has access to the Quran and *hadith*. As long as a Muslim has the requisite knowledge, he/she is entitled to engage in *ijtihad*. Therefore, each Muslim is entitled to his/her own jurisprudence (Al-Hibri, 2005). However, in reality, in most Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East, male clerics usually interpret for the

masses, and thus, individual understanding is lacking. This indeed impacts women's position in Islam.

Based on the principles of *ijtihad*, proper Islamic education is essential to critically assess Islamic law. Today, the interpretation of Islamic law is dominated by Muslim men, even for issues directly related to female matters such as marriage, abortion, female genital mutilation, veils. Therefore, for my future research I am interested in studying how Muslim women, such as Aisyah, who have formal religious education can produce alternative discourse to challenge both the Western dominant discourse on Muslims and the patriarchal interpretations within Islam. Muslim women who possess Islamic knowledge through formal Islamic education should have legitimacy to authentically produce their own jurisprudence.

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## APPENDIX

## Questionnaire

### Part I

#### 1. Personal Information

Name :  
 Age :  
 Gender : Female  
 Country of Origin :  
 Educational Background :  
 Marital status :

#### 2. Questions Related to Demography

- What is your US immigration status?
  - a. Non-immigrant (international student, etc.)
  - b. Immigrant (permanent resident/green card)
  - c. US born (citizen)
- (Skip question 2 if the answer is c)
- How long have you been in the US?
- What is your occupation?

### Part II

1. Do you join any De-Kalb Muslims community activities? (Y/N)
2. If your answer to no.1 is No, what is the reason?
3. If your answer to no.2 is Yes, what kind of activities do you join and how often do you join the activities in the community?
4. Do you think that these activities strengthen /support your Islamic values? If yes, in what way did the activity improve your Islamic values? If not, why?
5. What motivates you to join these activities?
6. Is there any challenge that you faced in joining the activity? (Y/N) Could you elaborate your answer?

7. Do you get any support/ challenge from your family/society in joining these activities?
8. Which Islamic tradition do you consider yourself in? (Whabi, Syafei, Hambali, or Hanafi)
9. What is the reason for you to practice/not practice veil (hijab)?
10. Since when have you practice hijab?
11. Did you face any challenge after you practice hijab?
12. Is there any difference in how the American society treat you regarding your hijab after 9/11 (for participants live in the US since before 9/11)?
13. How do you express your identity in larger American community?
14. Do you join any other activities outside the Muslim community?
15. What do you think about the gathering/activity?
16. How is your interaction with people in your community, your colleagues, your classmates, and your family?
17. How do you make decision regarding your education or your children education (for participant with children)?

Note: Your responses to this interview will be confidential and only used for research purposes.