

“Mold[ing] people of all colors into one vast family:” Malcolm X and Interculturation

Péter Gaál-Szabó

El Hajj Malik El-Shabbaz, more widely known as Malcolm X, establishes himself initially as a separationist in the footsteps of Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad. Even as a disciple of the latter he rejects communication across cultures and infamously dismisses whites as “blue-eyed devils.” Relentlessly upgrading his face means uprooting society—or so he seems in contemporary media. The conversion to Sunni Islam following his pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) in April 1964, however, changes his course of thinking opening up his self to interculturation—reestablishing his self as an intercultural one and envisioning a transnational (religio-)cultural community.

The concept of interculturation initially gained significance in the postcolonial investigations of the West Indies mainly connected to the works by Kamau Brathwaite. Interculturation is regarded by him as the complementary asset of acculturation, which refers to “the process of absorption of one culture by another” (Brathwaite 11), while interculturation pertains to “a more reciprocal activity, a process of intermixture and enrichment” (11). Importantly, Brathwaite thereby envisions that creolization in the West Indies establishes a cultural space in which, instead of the workings of a cultural superstratum to render it as a mere “adjunct of imperialism” (O’Callaghan 80), intercultural exchange ensures the creation of new cultural subjectivities. As Evelyn O’Callaghan points out, “Populated by people from elsewhere, the West Indian colonies had their matrix in ambiguity [...] the region [was] rooted in contradictions, schizophrenic in its political, economic, and social structures” (80). Constant ambivalence stemming from a “condition [...] dangerously unstable and potentially creative” (80) provided for a mould

that could override colonial opposition. Inherently interculturalization involves “continuous mutual adjustment processes of sociocultural groups” (Adler 35); thus it foresees change in several cultural groups juxtaposed, not just in the subverted, marginalized ones. Furthermore, as Henry Paget adds regarding the Afro-Caribbean region, apart from reconstructive work “reconstituting aspects of shattered Amerindian, Indian, and African worldviews” (15) and synthetic work “to advance the mixed or hybrid parts of these imploded world-views” (15), transformative work envisions “the projecting of new national communities” (15). The latter puts emphasis on “newness” that invokes novelty, inventiveness, and creativity, instead of on primarily revitalizing “fragments of broken traditions” (15). Cultural osmosis thus works contrary to cultural boundaries: it goes beyond assimilation or mutual face adjustment by overwriting binaries not simply through annulling differences—diminishing or neglecting them—but through merging, i.e., a new cultural whole emerges.

Similarly to concepts of hybridity or thirding, interculturalization involves existing cultural forms and segments of identity and, simultaneously, cultural borrowings. This “in-betweenity”—a term popularized by the Caribbean economist Lloyd Best—seeks to incorporate despite difference, antagonism, or trauma. As James Clifford argues regarding travelling cultures, insisting on, what he calls, discrepant cosmopolitanism, “Unresolved historical dialogues between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality, homogeneity and differences (cross-cutting ‘us’ and ‘them’) characterize [...] cultures of displacement and transplantation [that] are inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political, and cultural interaction” (36). In all the cultural juxtaposition interculturalization manages “to bring those fragments together to form new, provisional and transnational cultural wholes” (Pollard 28), thereby rendering them culturally salient.

Interculturalization proves one significant way of assuring continuity for Malcolm X—both regarding identity negotiation and maintenance. Much as his conversions (from an atheist [with a Baptist background, though] to Black Muslim, and later to Sunni Muslim) may appear as radical turns with disruptions of previous social and institutional ties, his experience of contemporary American racism as the originating cause engendering his conversions remains in focus. In view of Orlando Patterson’s “post inception or hysteretic processes” of continuity, which establish that “there has been uninterrupted continuity of the object or

(recurring) event in question, yet no apparent continuity in the set of factors causing it” (76), the different nodes on the string of events in Malcolm X’s life are primarily connected through the initiating idea of “Little”-ness, i.e., his apprehension of racism undergirded by the cultural trauma of slavery and not the apparent causal sequence of his transformations from convict to Black Muslim and to Sunni Muslim. The reasoning for his change of names shows an underlying racial dynamics: “The Muslim’s ’X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know. For me, my ’X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ’Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears” (Haley 229). Racial thinking provides a constant background for his political action and even his religious conversions.

Malcom X’s Muslim identity necessitates referring to the religious aspects of interculturalization. It can be a problematic concept for religious interaction as interculturalization may be seen as syncretism: as is the case for African Americans, they were often forced to adopt Eurocentric religious performances in “syncretic and conflictual struggle with the West” (Kanneh 42). In this way, syncretism was a technical solution for spatial juxtaposition of different religious realms by African Americans in a minority or colonized position in an attempt of masking to maintain their own religious belief¹. Furthermore, interculturalization is taken as a methodology of mission to make a new convert culture, however, doctrinal soundness is not ignored—thus cultural boundaries are maintained. Both conceptualizations reflect a superstratum approach to interculturalization and neglect the experience of substratum cultures in the vortex of encounter. Just the opposite can be validated as Chibueze Udeani has it, “As a normative idea for the actions of those involved, inculturation is in a position to animate, direct, and innovate the particular cultures in questions” (135). This understanding of intercultural processes supports Paget’s idea of an underlying transformative work, which involves moving away from any essentialist conceptualization of one’s own culture toward a pluralist one. As Thomas G. Grenham purports from

¹ From another angle, syncretism is regarded as a similar process to interculturalization, whereby, as David Carrasco puts it, “rituals, beliefs and symbols from different religions are combined into new meanings” (qtd. in Starkloff 56). Even in this definition, however, the acculturating process (in contrast to interculturalization) appears emphasized “in ritual performances that enable people to locate themselves within the new world of meaning” (57).

a Christian point of view, “religious and theological interculturalism is an evolutionary process that envisions the viewing of ‘truth’ as a shared reality in the midst of pluralism and diversity” (71) and “diverse visions of God’s self-revelation must be respected and appropriated accordingly” (76). Even though both thinkers make their observations from a Christian point of view and not Muslim; in a cultural discourse, their denial of religious essentialism and insistence on communication between cultures, foreshadows mutual transformation regarding the understanding of revelations and thus the positioning of the religio-cultural self in the in-between. Malcolm X’s religious encounters lead thus far beyond simple syncretic masking, undergirding a transformative work that, in his case, indeed envisions a new transnational (Pan-African) religio-cultural community.

Initially, however, as a Nation of Islam convert, he invites criticism from all sides, not just from white and black Christian America identifying him with a sect, but also from international Muslim students accusing him and Black Muslims of doctrinal unsoundness, thus “[taking] a good deal of Muslim heat over his organization’s religious teachings” (DeCaro 200). He even receives a copy of Abd-Al-Rahman Azzam’s *The Eternal Message of Muhammad* signed by the author himself from Dr. Manmoud Youssef Shawarbi, Director of the Federation of Islamic Associations (Haley 368), to attract Malcolm X to “true Islam.” As a potential Islamic leader in America, Malcolm X represents for Muslim religious and political leaders access to American affairs not just from the point of view of mission, but also politically speaking. In this way, helping Malcolm X fulfill his Hajj can be seen as an investment to further Muslim objectives, i.e., to incorporate American Muslims in world Islam without changing the assets of Islam. As Louis DeCaro reasserts, “Malcolm’s Hajj was an elite tour entirely underwritten by men with an agenda of their own” (216). Interculturalism from the point of view of the transnational Islamic world is presented as acceptance of the hajji Malcolm as an Imam, with generous disregard of his doctrinal ignorance and flows without yielding to any teachings or traditions of Islam.

Malcolm X appears oblivious to his Protestant (Christian) roots and even recurrently attacks religious and other groups, i.e., “labor, the Catholics, the Jews, and liberal Protestants” (“A Message to the Grassroots” 16). He effects identity closure solely by embracing Elijah Muhammad’s cosmological reasoning: insisting on the superiority of

Blacks over whites, he claims in a speech of 1962 about Black history that

the black man's been here a long time, but the white man has been here a short time. Now the white man only knows about himself, what he's been told, and he hasn't been told anything. He came to himself up in the caves of Europe, and he can't get any information that goes beyond the cave. And since you and I fell into his trap and were made deaf, dumb, and blind by him, we don't have access to any information that the white man doesn't know about. So we think that the beginning of the white man meant the beginning of everything, us too. We're not aware that we were here before he was made. ("Black Man's History" 43–44)

The self-approving creativity necessary in identity negotiation is employed to facilitate distancing and the rhetorical severance of any cultural ties so much as to equate whites with extremities: "A new tribe, a weak tribe, a wicked tribe, a devilish tribe, a diabolical tribe, a tribe that is devilish by nature" (61). Malcolm X's speeches do not initially reflect multiple cultural embeddedness as he overtly positions himself in contrast to the white race as a leader of the Nation of Islam, always emphasizing racial dichotomy; in fact, until his conversion to Sunni Islam, he denies any cultural exchange except for forced acculturation African Americans were subjected to. As he states during the Harlem Freedom Rally in 1960, the "collective mass of black people [...] have been colonized, enslaved, lynched, exploited, deceived, abused, etc." ("Minister" 414).

Yet, apparent and overt negation of influences does not obliterate them. Alone the fact that Malcolm X's father was a Baptist preacher may account for his Biblical knowledge and its use in his arguments. Furthermore, besides apt reference to Elijah Muhammad's teachings in his nation of Islam phase, the bulk of his theological argumentation is based on the Bible and on his biblical interpretations—not on the Quran. Partly, the employment of Biblical knowledge serves strategic purposes since much of his audience is embedded in the Black Church, as he calls them, "Christian-bred Negroes" (Haley 238), and a prime means to persuade them is to employ knowledge that they are familiar with. Using repeatedly phrases like "as your own Christian bible says" (see, e.g., "Harvard Law School Forum" 131), he performs knowledge, granting him credibility, and attacks from within. While the heavy referencing of the Bible can be validated from a Muslim point of view—as the Bible is seen to contain revelations for the Muslim believer—not even after his Hajj, when he even symbolically receives a translation of the Holy Quran,

does he change his main body of quoted reference to the Quran. The lack of a shift of emphasis in this respect proves the prevalence of the African American cultural heritage in his thought. So while Malcolm X refuses to see his African American identity as “hyphenated identity” (Eriksen 233); it nevertheless cannot but admit to, in Eriksen’s footsteps of differentiation, a creole one denying “the existence of pure, discrete cultures” (234)—yet, in an intercultural sense, allowing for new mergers and interpretations.

As a letter of his from Mecca testifies, it is his conversion to Sunni Islam that facilitates his interculturalization, evolving as he goes through liberation from his own racist ideology:

They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black skin Africans. But we were all participating in the same rituals, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had lead [sic] me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white [...] I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color (“April 20” 59).

Much as he sees Muslims as colorblind, he yet has to face the fact that color does have some differentiating role between people, i.e., it can signify common background and thus perpetuate the feeling of belongingness to people akin:

There was a color pattern in the huge crowds. Once I happened to notice this, I closely observed it thereafter. Being from America made me intensely sensitive to matters of color. I saw that people who looked alike drew together and most of the time stayed together. This was entirely voluntary; there being no other reason for it. But Africans were with Africans. Pakistanis were with Pakistanis. And so on. I tucked it into my mind that when I returned home I would tell Americans this observation; that where true brotherhood existed among all colors, where no one felt segregated, where there was no “superiority” complex, no “inferiority” complex—then voluntarily, naturally, people of the same kind felt drawn together by that which they had in common. (Haley 395)

Intermingling with people of different ethnic and racial background puts him in a condensed situation where, in the course of physical proximity of races during the Hajj, he reinterprets his view of human nature. His break with Elijah Muhammad perpetuated by inconsistencies in Black Muslim conduct and Malcolm X’s disobedience to hush over Kennedy’s death, finds theological grounding:

Then I saw the Ka’ba, a huge black stone house in the middle of the Great Mosque. It was being circumambulated by thousands upon thou-

sands of praying pilgrims, both sexes, and every size, shape, color, and race in the world. I knew the prayer to be uttered when the pilgrim's eyes first perceive the Ka'ba. Translated, it is "O God, You are peace, and peace derives from You. So greet us, O Lord, with peace." [...] Standing on Mount Arafat had concluded the essential rites of being a pilgrim to Mecca. No one who missed it could consider himself a pilgrim. [...] I said, "The brotherhood! The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as one! It has proved to me the power of the One God." [...] The color-blindness of the Muslim world's religious society and the color-blindness of the Muslim world's human society: these two influences had each day been making a greater impact, and an increasing persuasion against my previous way of thinking. [...] I had been blessed by Allah with a new insight into the true religion of Islam, and a better understanding of America's entire racial dilemma. (Haley 387–89)

Even though Malcolm X dates his Islamic conversion back to his time in prison, it more likely marks the beginning of his journey to Islam resembling, what Massimo Leone calls, the “destabilization of the self” (1) that leads through the “crisis of the self” (53) to “re-stabilization” (79) in Sunni Islam, or as Richard M. Eaton has it, the process of “accretion” in which “existing entities in their cosmology” (111) are retained. His conversion experience shows arrival from a previously neuroticized condition to a safe haven of tranquility, thereby signifying a profound change cosmologically; i.e., “reform” in which the “preexisting cosmological structure [...] is firmly repudiated” (111). Diffusing (see Eller 162) the experience of human unity and unity in one God into his worldview proves an enlightening conversion for him which effects ultimate change in both his religious and political understanding.

From the point of view of social conversion, Malcolm X's social motives are rather similar to how R.W. Bulliet sees it, however, in an inverted way: in his view “who convert for worldly, rather than spiritual reasons, will find life in the new religious community more appealing the more it resembles their life in the previous community [...] no one willingly converts from one religion to another if by virtue of conversion he markedly lowers his social status” (qtd. in Minkov 14–15). For Malcolm X social equality proved an initiating experience as it served as a contrast to contemporary America, especially as during his Hajj he is treated as an equal Muslim even by the sheik Faisal; thus for him social conversion is not about negotiating an identity of previous valence, but about a new gain of a rewarding social identity. This is especially valid in view of E.M. Pye's definition of transplantation, as “an interplay between

what is taken to be the content of the religion and the key factors in the situation which it is entering” (236). Malcolm X’s account of his Sunni conversion entails a direct reference to his American background, highlighting his dissatisfaction with America as a primary factor for his conversion as well as the method of Islam as a cure for it. That his is not only personal but social conversion is shown by him connecting the individual with the political when he explains the relevance of Islamic conversion: “the religion of Islam actually restores one’s human feelings, human rights, human incentives, human his talent [sic]” (“Warren”).

The idea of colorblindness in the Islamic world is naturally emphasized by his hosts since he is seen as a potential political ally “to spread their influence abroad and soften derogatory images of Islam” (Curtis 92). Malcolm X is often treated throughout his journey as a political agent—e.g., he is even invited by a Chinese ambassador who assured him of his sympathies with the oppressed Black people in America. In the Muslim context, however, Muslim racism is acknowledged vaguely as an imported illness of Western influence as, for example, pointed out in a talk with Azzam: “the complexities of color, and the problems of color which exist in the Muslim world, exist only where, and to the extent that, that area of the Muslim world has been influenced by the West” (Haley 385). Whitewashing Muslim history establishes the Muslim self in contrast to the Christian self as morally superior, as well as it serves for Malcolm X to envision a social paradise. Muslim interculturalism further evolves when a direct link is emphasized by Azzam between the root of Islam and African American heritage, insisting on “the racial lineage of the descendants of Muhammad the Prophet [i.e.,] they were both black and white” (Haley 385).

The reconsideration of his race theory emanates from such biologically informed interculturalism. Even though he continues to dismiss white conduct as guilty of “collective crime” (“Warren”), he detaches the color concept from pigmentation, claiming that “white is actually an attitude more so than it’s a color” (“Warren”). The change is significant as it allows for “ambiguity” in Pye’s sense, referring to “unresolved coexistence of elements belonging to the transplanting tradition and to the situation which is being entered” (237); i.e., in the new religious discourse Malcolm X accommodates the American social challenges anew in a way that also recoups his newly negotiated identity. For Pye recoupment refers to the “reassertion or reclarification of that which was being transplanted in some adequate way” (237)—as part of

“routinization” to achieve a “New Steady State” (275), in Anthony Wallace’s coinage, supported from within and from without especially in the framework of new alliances from the Arab world and Africa. Through the maneuver he retains personal valence, i.e., a “moral posture without total acceptance or total rejection of the world of white people” (DeCaro 220) that sustains cultural and spiritual superiority in his struggle to find liberation in his racist homeland.

After his Hajj Malcolm X seeks to maintain cross-cultural alliances, thereby further interculturating the self. As Louis DeCaro points out, in a radio interview he avoids topics concerning Arab Muslims, thereby defending these acquaintances, to remain faithful “to his evangelistic claims, as well as to his personal Muslim loyalty” (219). His new cross-cultural ties open up new vistas for him: instead of defining the Muslim self in contrast to white America, he incorporates through his multidirectional communication his past stand (e.g., his dubious view of Black history derived from Black Muslim cosmology) and his new understanding—while making use of the same creativity he employed to maintain cultural boundaries. The latter refers to bridging the obvious gap between experiencing conversion to a self-anointed deity, a “*divine* leader [with] no human weaknesses or faults” (Haley 421) in the person of Elijah Muhammad and his turn to Sunni Islam. When asked about his conversion to Islam in an interview by Robert Penn Warren, Malcolm X, then already El Hajj Malik El-Shabbaz, addresses his experience with the Black Muslim belief system, not the enlightening experience of Sunni Islam. As he claims, when “I was in prison and I was an atheist. I didn’t believe in anything,” but “one of the main things that I read about it that appealed to me was in Islam a man is regarded as a human being” (209). In his reasoning, however, this dichotomy is washed over through the creative linking of past and present, in fact, defending, even if in a sometimes apologetic way, his past adherences and professing his new cultural/religious understanding. As he observes,

Since I learned the truth in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include all kinds—some Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists! I have friends who are called capitalists, Socialists, and Communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, extremists—some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are black, brown, red, yellow, and white! (Haley 432).

Interculturation for the Sunni Malcolm X is not a unifocal activity: it involves the creative reworking of his Black Muslim religio-cultural

identity as well as negotiating identity in the international framework of Sunni Islam against a white American social setting. In all this, he ventures on a journey of spiritual rebirth, which serves to authenticate the self spiritually, culturally, and socially. The latter especially renders Malcolm X's interculturalization complex, as it illuminates that his conversion, in the fashion of social conversions, inherently positions him as a political subject and consequently, despite seeming simplicity, ultimately an ambiguous one.

Works Cited

- Adler, Leonore Loeb and Uwe P. Gielen eds. *Migration: Immigration and Emigration in International Perspective*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. Print.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*. Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Pub., 1974. Print.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Curtis IV, Edward E. *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2002. Print.
- DeCaro, Louis A. *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*. New York: New York UP, 1996. Print.
- Eaton, Richard M. "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India." *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*. Ed. Richard C. Martin. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001. 106–23. Print.
- Eller, Jack David. *Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. "Creolization and Creativity." *Global Networks* 3. 3 (2003): 223–37. Print.
- Grenham, Thomas G. *The Unknown God: Religious and Theological Interculturalization*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2005. Print.
- Haley, Alex. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965. Print.
- Kanneh, Kadiatu. *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanisms and Black Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

- Leone, Massimo. *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Minkov, Anton. *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans: Kisve Bahasi Petitions and Ottoman Social Life: 1670–1730*. Leiden: Brill, 2004. Print.
- O’Callaghan, Evelyn. “The ‘Pleasures’ of Exile in Selected West Indian Writing Since 1987.” *Caribbean Cultural Identities*. Ed. Glyne Griffith. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2001. 73–103. Print.
- Paget, Henry. *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Patterson, Orlando. “Culture and Continuity: Causal Structures in Socio-Cultural Persistence.” *Matters of Culture: Cultural Sociology in Practice*. Eds. Roger Friedland and John Mohr. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 71–110. Print.
- Pollard, Charles W. *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004. Print.
- Pye, E.M. “The Transplantation of Religions.” *Numen* 16 (1969): 234–39. Print.
- Starkloff, Carl F. *A Theology of the In-Between: The Value of Syncretic Process*. Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 2002. Print.
- Udeani, Chibueze. *Inculturation as Dialogue: Igbo Culture and the Message of Christ*. New York: Rodopi, 2007. Print.
- Wallace, Anthony F.C. “Revitalization Movements.” *American Anthropologist* 58.2 (Apr. 1956): 264–81. Print.
- Warren, Robert Penn. “Malcolm X, June 2, 1964.” *Who Speaks For the Negro?: Archival Collection*. Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, 2014. Web. 10 March 2014. <<http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/malcolm-x>>
- X, Malcolm. “A Message to the Grassroots.” *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches And Statements*. New York: Grove P, 1965. 3–18. Print.
- . “April 20, 1964, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.” *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches And Statements*. New York: Grove P, 1965. 59–60. Print.
- . “Minister Malcolm X Enunciates The Muslim Program.” *Black Nationalism in America*. Ed. John H. Bracey, Jr. et al. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970. 413–21. Print.

- . “Black Man’s History” *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches*. New York: Merlin House/Seaver Books, 1971. 23–67. Print.
- . “*Harvard Law School Forum of March 24, 1961.*” *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard*. Ed. Archie Epps. New York: Paragon House, 1991. 115–31. Print.