

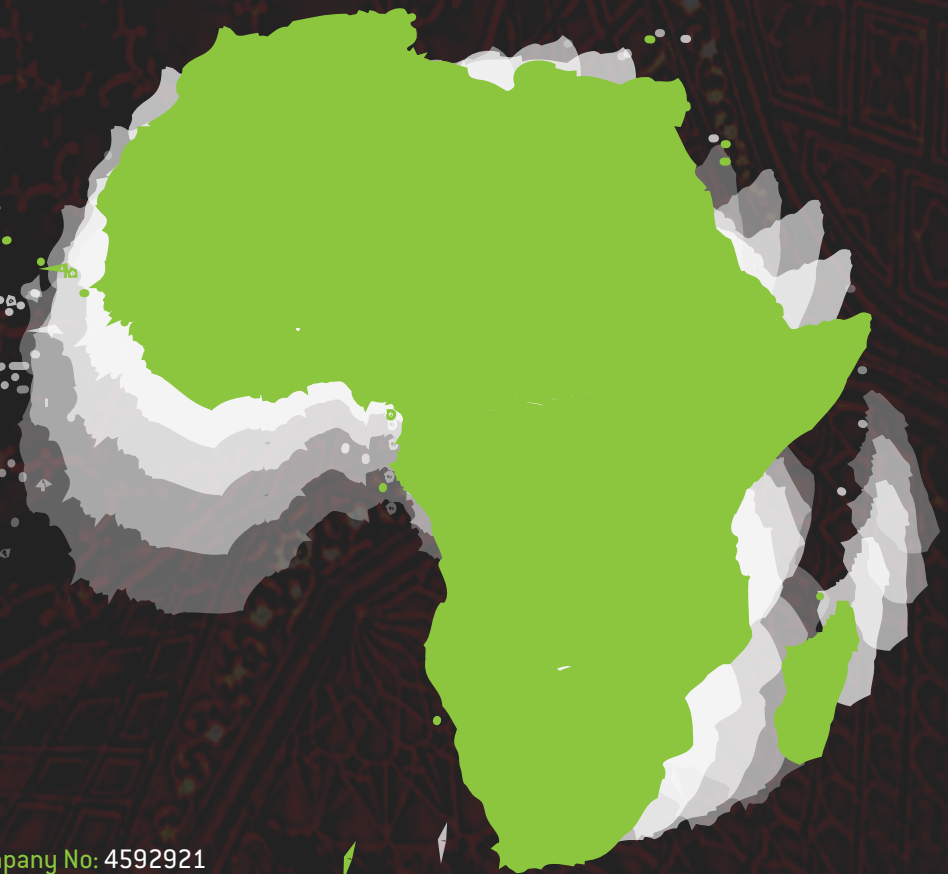
# THE UMMAH AND ETHNICITY:

## Listening to the Voices of African Heritage Muslims in Leicester

**Dr Momodou Sallah** (Lead Researcher)

### Community Researchers:

Landing Sanyang  
Abubacarr Gassama  
Zara Lartey  
Nurat Adelopo  
Rakiya Sambo



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# Executive Summary

The position of Muslims in Europe post 7/7 and 9/11 has come under greater scrutiny as some countries seek to build more cohesive societies and others struggle to accommodate an increasingly distinct Muslim identity. Consequently resources have been poured into projects and studies to increase an understanding of Muslim communities and the challenges that confront them. Whilst over 70% of Britain's Muslim population is of South Asian origin, there are significant other sections of the Muslim communities who have hardly been given attention as Muslim identity has become synonymised with South Asian identity. It is in this context that the Leicester City Council commissioned the African Caribbean Citizens' Forum (ACCF) in the winter of 2009 and agreed the contract in April 2010 to conduct a community based research to better understand African Heritage Muslim communities in Leicester, including reverts and young people.

A lead researcher was appointed by the ACCF and he in turn recruited five community researchers of African heritage Muslim origin to conduct this project. The 2001 Census puts the number of African heritage Muslims in Leicester at just over 1800 but this has obviously increased largely due to the influx of Muslims of Somali origin after the Census which various social commentators put at between 6000 – 15,000 as well as the increase in reverts and Muslims coming from Africa for immigration and academic reasons. The plurality of Leicester and its vibrant Muslim community is also a key factor attracting Muslims of all backgrounds to settle here.

The lead researcher and the five community researchers took a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that operated on the basis that all members of the team were joint researchers and each member of the team is an expert in their own right. The research process was also influenced by the concept of experiential affinity, which recognises and celebrates the proximity of the researchers to the issues they were researching, at the same time maintaining academic objectivity. Three focus groups were held: one for young people between 16 – 25; one for reverts to Islam and another one for those of African heritage background who were born Muslims. Altogether 22 respondents took part in the three focus groups and the purposeful sampling approach used covered ethnicity, age, gender, occupation, nationality and length of stay in Leicester. The findings in this report are presented in six themes and cover a wide range of issues as follows:

**Positive experiences of being a Muslim in Leicester;**

**Intersectionality: race, religion, gender, nationality and age;**

**Challenges to practising Islam as an African heritage Muslim in Leicester;**

**Examples of discrimination;**

**Culture and Islam: points of convergence and divergence;**

**Resistance and Struggle: taking action to change the way things are.**

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The findings indicate that most of the respondents have very positive experiences of being Muslims in Leicester as African heritage people. These positive experiences range from the availability of mosques, halal shops, madrasahs to a vibrant Muslim community; these experiences were sharply contrasted with those of others who have lived in other countries like Germany and Holland, or even in other counties in the UK, where the experience was found to be far less positive.

A key theme that surfaced throughout the research is the extent to which constructed notions of religions identities like African heritage Muslims, do not stand alone, to the contrary intersectionality impacts on these constructed identities significantly. Issues like gender, age, ethnicity and nationality all interact to produce a cumulative effect that shapes their identities. The research findings indicate that intersectionality must be understood in contextualising the issues that shape the lives of young Muslims in particular and Muslims in general.

A long list of challenges confronting the African heritage Muslim communities in Leicester were documented by the research including lack of organisation in some sections of the African heritage Muslim communities, matrimonial concerns, lack of visible Black role models, aggressive preachers and discrimination African heritage Muslims face in some mosques.

A range of examples of discrimination meted out to African heritage Muslims both from the wider public and some sections of the more established Muslim communities were unveiled as well as perceived discrimination from the Black communities. These encounters of discrimination were also reported both within the public domain and through mainstream services.

The nexus between culture and Islam was also very apparent throughout the whole research as a significant amount of confusion was reported especially by the reverts and young respondents in the focus groups. These concerns centre on lack of adequate Islamic knowledge as well as reported lack of cohesion within the various Muslim communities. The report also explores resistance strategies employed by African heritage Muslims in Leicester and a number of recommendations to the challenges explored in this research.

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# Acknowledgement

We will first of all like to thank Leicester City Council for funding this research and the African Caribbean Citizens' Forum for conceptualising and commissioning it. We will especially like to mention Dr. Abdoulie Sallah, Deborah Sangster, Abdoulie Bittaye, Lois Wilson and Carol Varley for their immense contribution towards the realisation of this project. We also want to celebrate the contribution of the research participants and all the organisations that supported the implementation of this project.

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# Introduction

The African Caribbean Citizens' Forum (ACCF) was contracted by the Leicester City Council to deliver a piece of research that would be community based, increase knowledge around Leicester's Muslim African and African Caribbean Communities (including reverts and young people); and identify challenges that face these communities, being Muslim in Britain today. The lead researcher, an academic and community activist, was appointed to lead the project and he recruited five community researchers from the African heritage Muslim community, and using a Participatory Action Research Approach, went about finding out issues of concern to the communities under discussion.

This report will clearly set out the rationale for the research against the backdrop of the relevant policies and literature around African heritage Muslim communities in the UK. It will then position the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a preferred methodology to research the community under investigation as well as detailing methodological complexities encountered. We will then set out the findings of the research under themes to be explored in detail. This report will conclude with recommendations for relevant stakeholders in relation to issues of concern to African heritage Muslims in Leicester in particular and in the UK in general.

It is imperative from the onset to clearly state who we mean by African heritage Muslims. Based on the research brief and following intense discussions with the five community researchers, we agreed that all those of Black and African origin, mainly from Africa and the Caribbean would be included in this category. However this would not include people from North Africa and those of South Asian origin with African heritage for two main reasons: first a lot of literature is already available for Muslims of these origins and second, it would be too big to incorporate in this small exploratory research. On the above basis, African heritage would be interpreted as Black, in its descriptive context, African Muslims either of African or Caribbean origin.

The word Ummah means "community of believers" which is often used to denote the oneness of Muslims regardless of nationality, background, ethnicity or any other social stratification. The very essence of the concept of Ummah is universal brotherhood; if this is the case, is it then not a contradiction to talk of ethnicity within a universal brotherhood? This report, whilst identifying the largely positive experiences of African Heritage Muslims, also explores the tensions between the concept of Ummah and constructed ethnic and racial identities in the practice of Islam.

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# Chapter 1

## Muslims and African Heritage Muslims

### 1.1 Muslims and a changing Europe

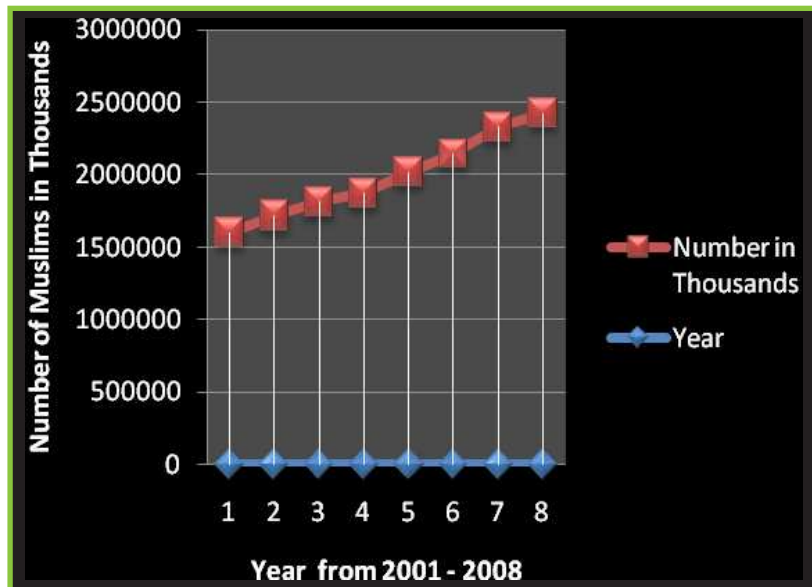
A microscopic view of Muslims in Europe, particularly those in Western Europe would reveal a magnified synopsis where European nations are experimenting with different social policy approaches, ranging from integration, assimilation to Multiculturalism (Sallah 2009) to cope with the growing influx and influence of Muslims in their respective societies. These coping mechanisms have led to the creation and implementation of different strategies, policies, laws and practices. Today, Muslims represent 5% (38 million) of the European population (Pew Forum Report, 2009). By 2015, Europe's Muslim population is expected to double, whereas Europe's non-Muslim population is projected to fall by at least 3.5%. Looking further ahead, conservative projections estimate that compared to today's 5%, Muslims will comprise at least 20% of Europe's population by 2050 (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2007). Some even predict that one-fourth of France's population could be Muslim by 2025 and that, if trends continue, Muslims could outnumber non-Muslims in France and perhaps in all of Western Europe by midcentury (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2007).

Over the past decades, the face of the Muslim population in Western Europe has been represented by those of Asian and Middle Eastern origin, most of whose ancestors migrated to Western Europe in search of greener pastures. However, recent years have witnessed a shifting pattern and the emergence of African Heritage Muslims in Western Europe, particularly in the UK. The sharp increase in the population of African Heritage Muslims in Western Europe, particularly the UK has been influenced by the migration of Africans and the conversion of African Caribbeans.

According to the Labour Force Survey (2008), Muslims account for 3% (2,422,000) of the UK population, although this figure slightly varies according to other surveys. The trajectory of the Muslim community in the UK has seen a modest rise since 2001, when it was just 1.5 million (Office for National Statistics, 2001). For instance the figure below gives the growth trend of the Muslim population in the UK since 2001.



## 1.2 Growth Trend of Muslim Population in the UK (2001 – 2008)



The majority of the Muslim population in the UK trace their roots to migration and settlement after the Second World War, although their presence dates back as far as the 17th century (Briggs and Birdwell, 2009). As many as 46% of the Muslim population in the UK were born in the UK (Bunglawala et al. 2004), with three-quarters having South Asian heritage. The Muslim community in the UK over the past ten years has become more diverse, with 56 nationalities and 70 languages forming the makeup of the community (Khan 2004; El Hassan 2003). In the 2001 Census, the majority of Muslims in England were of South Asian origin; 43% were Pakistani, 17% Bangladeshi and 9% Indian. Overall, 11.6% of Muslims were white, 4% of these White-British (including both converts and the UK-born children of Muslim immigrants) and 7.5% classified as 'Other White'. The latter figure included Turkish Cypriots, other Turks, Bosnian, Kosovan and other former Yugoslav refugees, North Africans and Middle Easterners. A further 6% of Muslims were Black-Africans (61.9% of African-born Muslims were from South and East Africa). Muslims in the UK have the youngest age profile of all faith groups, with 33.8% falling under the age of 16, compared to one-fifth of the population overall (20.2%) (Office for National Statistics, 2001). The average age is 28, 13 years below the national average (Yunas et al., 2007).

Muslims constitute some of the most deprived communities in the UK. Almost one-third of Muslims of working age have no qualifications, the highest proportion for any faith group (Bunglawala et al., 2004). Muslims are the most disadvantaged faith group in the British labour market; they are three times more likely to be unemployed than the majority Christian group of those that are employed and job prospects remain poor; Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are 2.5 times more likely than the white population to be unemployed and 3 times more likely to be in low-paid jobs (Yunas et al., 2007). Muslims are over-represented in the prison system. They make up 3% of the population but 9% of the population of prisoners (Guessous et al., 2001). This was further emphasised in the Review of the Evidence Based on Faith Communities (2006), where it was observed as follows:

In aggregate, Muslims are more likely than Sikhs and Hindus to be disadvantaged. They display low rates of labour market participation, the highest male unemployment rate, larger families, a higher percentage in social housing, the highest incidence of over-crowding and are most likely to live in deprived localities. The percentage with higher educational qualifications is low and the percentage working in blue-collar occupations is high. (Review of the Evidence Base on Faith Communities, 2006: p11)

Amidst all the attention being currently received by the Muslim community in the UK, very little attention has been received by Muslims of African heritage, therefore the lack of detail empirical data. However, recent events in the UK have led to attention being focused on “black” Muslims, otherwise known as Muslims of African heritage. According to the 2001 Population Census, Muslims of African heritage in the UK constituted 7.7% of the Muslim community (see table below).

Ethnic Group	Muslim
White	11.6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• British</li> <li>• Irish</li> <li>• Other White</li> </ul>	4.0 0.1 7.5
Mixed	4.1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White and Black Caribbean</li> <li>• White And Black African</li> <li>• White and Asian</li> <li>• Other Mixed</li> </ul>	0.1 0.7 1.9 1.4
Asian or Asian British	73.8
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indian</li> <li>• Pakistani</li> <li>• Bangladeshi</li> <li>• Other Asian</li> </ul>	8.6 42.7 16.7 5.8
Black or Black British	6.9
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black Caribbean</li> <li>• Black African</li> <li>• Other Black</li> </ul>	0.3 6.2 0.4
Chinese or Other Ethnic Group	3.7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese</li> <li>• Other Ethnic Group</li> </ul>	0.0 3.6
All People	100
Base	1,524,887

Source Census of Population 2001, Table S104 England and Wales (Crown Copyright)

The Review of the Evidence Base on Faith Communities Report (2006) observed that a significant number of the Muslim community is largely concentrated in the West Midlands, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and the East Midlands areas. The scenario is highlighted as follows:

Muslims are predominantly located in London, the major cities of the West Midlands and the towns and cities of eastern Lancashire, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire ... as well as the Leicester/Nottingham regions... (Review of the Evidence Base on Faith Communities, 2006: p14).

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## 1.3 Muslims in Leicester

Leicester has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the United Kingdom (UK) outside London (Muslims in Leicester Report, 2010). The Muslim communities in Leicester hail from predominantly Indian (mainly Gujarati), Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds. According to the 2001 Census, Leicester's population was 279,921, of which just over 30,000 (11%) were Muslims, making them the third-largest faith group in Leicester after Christians and Hindus. The 2001 Population Census also showed that people of African heritage in Leicester stood at 20,570 (see table below 2). At the same time, the population of the African heritage Muslims was 1842, which equalled to around 9% of the African Heritage population, and 6.1% of the Muslim population in Leicester (see table 3). Equally, the African Muslim heritage population accounted for 0.7% of the total Leicester population in 2001 (Census Population, 2001).

However, since the implementation of the 2001 Population Census, the city of Leicester has witnessed a significant surge of Somali Muslims, estimated by the Leicester City Council to be in the region of 6,000–10,000 (Muslims in Leicester Report, 2010).

### Population of African Heritage People in Leicester in 2001

Category	Number
Mixed: white and black Caribbean	2841
Mixed: white and black African	539
Black or black British	8595
Black or black British: Caribbean	4610
Black or black British: African	3432
Black or black British: other black	553
<b>Total</b>	<b>20570</b>

*Source: 2001 Population Census*

### Population of African Heritage Muslims in Leicester in 2001

Category	Number
Mixed: white and black Caribbean	31
Mixed: white and black African	131
Black or black British: Caribbean	98
Black or black British: African	1517
Black or black British: other black	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>1842</b>

*Source: 2001 Population Census*

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# Chapter 2

## Research Methodology

### 2.1 Research aim and objectives

- Deliver a community based research project
- Increase knowledge around Leicester’s Muslim African and African Caribbean Communities (including reverts and young people)
- Identify challenges that face these communities, being Muslim in Britain today

### 2.2 Methodological approach: Participatory Action Research and Experiential Affinity

Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1983), Participatory Action and Learning (Jayakaran 1996) and Participatory Action Research (Whyte 1991; Baum 2006; Chambers 2007) whilst applied in different contexts; have similar principles and share methodological approaches in putting the researched community at the centre of the research process, listening to their organic voices without seeking to package the messages from the research for the convenience of the researchers and commissioners of the research. The fundamental essence of the methodological approach:

*“...seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self reflective enquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves...”* (Baum et al. 2006:854).

Whyte (1991) argues that this approach is different from the “conventional model of pure research” where the researched are treated as passive subjects and subjected to the “elitist model” where the researcher is the expert and knows it all (pg. 20). Baum et al. (2006) continue to argue that a defining feature of PAR is the blurring of the line between the two until the “the researched become the researchers” (pg. 854). This approach differs from what can be called old paradigm or positivist science which

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speaks of a single reality, objectively and independently measurable by scientist where variables can be controlled and manipulated to determine causal connections; Baum et al. (2006) argue for a new paradigm science, encompassing PAR, “where the observer has an impact on the phenomena being observed and brings to their enquiry a set of values that would exert influence in the study”. This perspective advocates for the rejection of the “Mathematisation” of the world where research focuses on only the things “that could be measured, countered and quantified ... [where] the scientific world is an abstraction from the lived world, or the world we experience” (pg. 856). In conducting a baseline study, a decision was made to recruit five community researchers from the Muslim community and develop a methodological approach that they believe will work and best solicit the information we seek in the research aim and objectives. Our decision as a team was informed by the view that:

*“Qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the world as seen through the eyes of the people being studied. It aims not to impose preordained concepts; hypotheses and theory are generated during the course of conducting the research as the meaning emerges from the data.” (Wilmot, online)*

This approach was based on the rationale that the affected community are experts of their lives and understand their lives better than anyone else and that the lead researcher was not the expert who knew it all. The research process then became a joint enterprise between the researcher and the researched where decisions were jointly made and practically debated. The approach of the lead researcher was to engage in a process with the researched that seeks to tip the balance of power in their favour; and place them at the centre of naming their world. The lead researcher had expert knowledge on research processes but the community researchers also had expert knowledge of their lives as African heritage Muslims living in Leicester. Another significant consideration that informed our approach to the research has been that of Cultural Affinity (Oakley 1981) and Experiential Affinity (Boushel 2002); this concept starts from the position that the researchers share and understand the reality of the community being researched and might therefore better understand how the world is constructed and named and therefore interacted with. In applying this concept to our research, we understood that as African heritage Muslims, we share some of the realities of the communities we were researching and whilst we are clear about maintaining academic objectivity, we are not removed and detached from the communities being researched.

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## 2.3 Recruitment of Community Researchers

A brief was prepared (appendix 3) explaining what was required to fulfil the role of community researchers and what they can hope to gain in turn. This brief was widely circulated in Leicester regardless of religious orientation but targeted more specifically at the African heritage Muslim communities. Whilst the initial intention was to appoint three community researchers, six very competent and keen applications were received and a decision was made to recruit all of them. All of the applicants were African heritage Muslims with an association with Leicester except one. This person later dropped out due to work and study timetables clashing with the research commitments. The five recruited were three women and 2 men, four of them were born as Muslims and one was a recent revert.

## 2.4 Research Technique

Three planning and training days were conducted by the lead researcher with the community researchers to cover some basic areas of conducting research including: designing research objectives, participatory action research, how to conduct literature reviews, choosing methodology and operationalisation/implementation of research projects (Please see appendix 4 for the programme of one of the training days). Following the training, the community researchers were involved in reviewing the relevant literature (see appendix 6 for literature review process) and concluded that given the nature of the community to be researched, the best methodological approach would be to conduct three focus group interviews focusing on the following groups: African heritage born Muslims, African heritage reverts, and young African heritage Muslims. After discussing many methodological approaches, it was recognised by the research team that whilst this is a baseline research, a quantitative approach would yield less value as the objective is to find out the issues that confront the African heritage Muslim community and challenges they face and that this is best achieved by employing a qualitative approach, largely the focus group and to decide whether to employ a complimentary method once the focus group interviews have been analysed. The research team also made a conscious decision not to focus the research on the opinions of community “gatekeepers”, as this approach has been largely used by previous research projects in this area but instead to take a sample of people from across the board. Consequently the three focus groups were conducted, engaging a total of 22 Muslims of African heritage living in Leicester spanning a wide range of gender, nationality, employment status, age and length of residence in Leicester as illustrated in the tables below. Three focus groups were conducted consisting of 9 respondents in the African heritage born Muslims, 5 in the African heritage reverts focus group and 8 respondents in the young African heritage Muslims focus group between 15 – 25.

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## 2.5 Demographics

### Muslim Reverts Focus Group

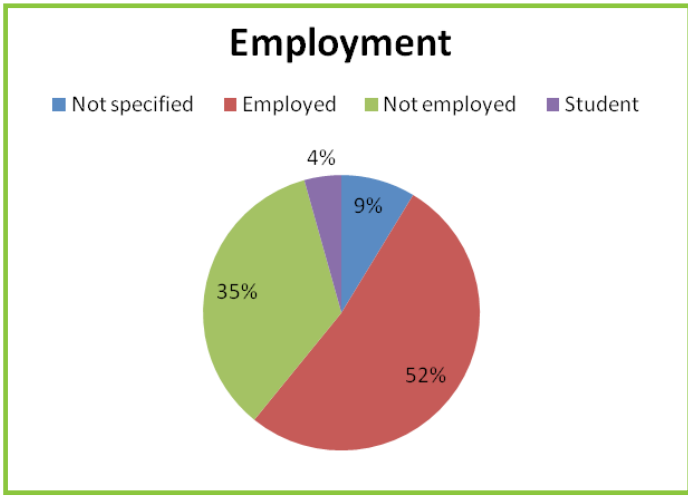
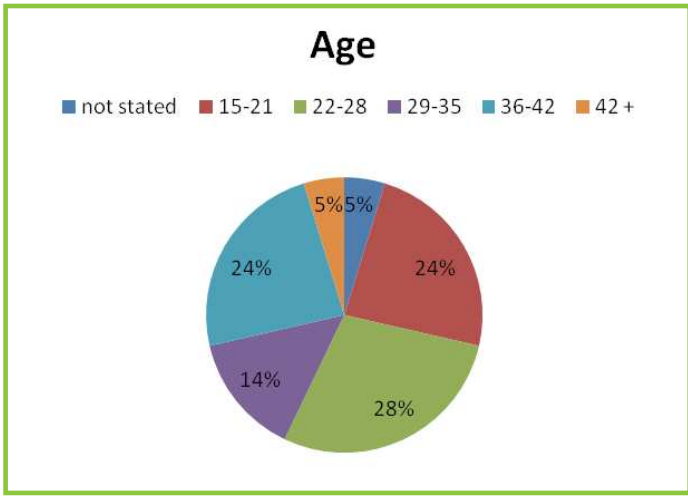
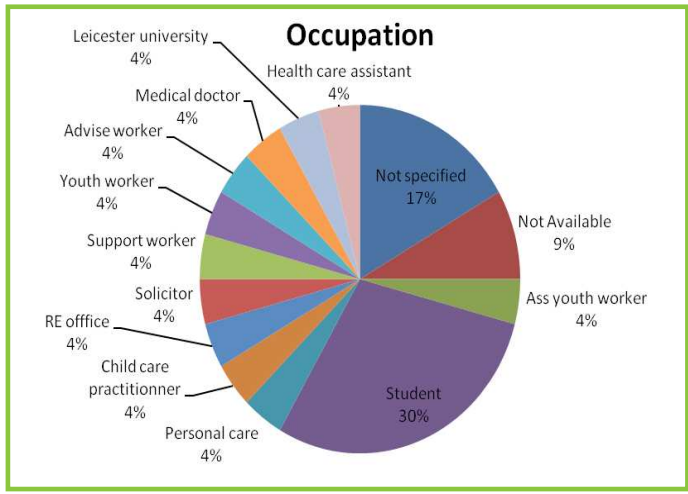
Status	gender	length of stay in Leicester	Age
Reverted	Female	above 5	Not stated
Reverted	Female	above 5	30
Reverted	Male	above 5	41
Reverted	Male	above 5	40-50
Reverted	Female	0-12 months	21

### Young Muslim focus Group

Status	Gender	Age	Length of Stay in Leicester
Muslim	Female	25	Above 5
Reverted	Male	16	Above 5
Reverted	Male	16	Above 5
Muslim	Male	16	Above 5
Muslim	Male	15	Above 5
Muslim	Female	25	Above 5
Reverted	Female	24	0-12 months
Muslim	Female	24	1-2 years
Muslim	Male	25	Above 5

### Born African Muslim Focus Group

	Gender	Age	Length of Stay in Leicester
Muslim	Female	36	Above 5
Muslim	Female	35	2-4 years
Muslim	Male	27	Above 5
Muslim	Female	37	Above 5
Muslim	Male	22	2-4 years
Muslim	Male	37	2-4 years
Muslim	Male	37	Above 5
Muslim	Female	40	Above 5
Muslim	Male	30	2-4 years



## Nationality

British	10
Nigerian	5
Somali	1
Senegalese	1
Tanzania	1
Gambian	2
Ghanaian	1
Guinean	1



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## 2.6 Sampling and Analyses

The approach of non-probability purposeful sampling was taken to best capture the qualitative methodological approach. This meant that as a team, we recruited a sample of the population under investigation with the following characteristics in mind: age, gender, length of habitation in Leicester, employment status, born Muslim or reverted to Islam, nationality/citizenship, and ethnic origin. All of these factors were crucially considered in determining the respondents we recruited. However it should be noted that our samples were also affected by who turned up on the day.

In analysing the data emerging from the focus groups; all three focus groups were transcribed and the lead researcher used Nvivo, a qualitative data analyses tool, to initially code the emerging data into 12 themes which were then revisited manually by the community researchers and recalibrated by the community researchers to ten themes and further cut down to six in presenting these findings.

## 2.7 Limitations of the research

Given the resources and time at our disposal, the research team have been very resourceful in delivering this research project and coming out with groundbreaking findings in an area that has previously received limited research attention. Notwithstanding that, it must be stated that a number of limitations could be identified.

Whilst the approach of the research has been qualitative and focused on perception and perspectives, the numbers are too small for wider generalisation and in this light; this research provides depth of coverage to illuminate the challenges confronting African heritage Muslims rather than width of coverage and generalisability.

Second, by far the Somali section of the African heritage Muslims is the biggest in Leicester and the sample of Somalis do not represent this percentage and this needs to be redressed in future research projects. Again as this was an exploratory piece of research, it should be something future researches could build on.

Third, a deliberate attempt was made not to focus on the “gatekeepers” to the various African heritage Muslim communities in terms of this research and instead to hear the authentic voices of the population being researched. This might be seen as a limitation in some quarters but this could be something for another research team to take up.

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## 2.8 Methodological complexities

The project team has encountered great difficulties in recruiting participants and two of the three focus groups had to be rescheduled; this can largely be attributed to the reluctance of some sections of the community under research to interact with Leicester City Council based on past negative experiences. Similar to this, we have also encountered a number of strong voices from the community who refused to engage with the research process due to their past experiences with the African Caribbean Citizens' Forum (ACCF). These concerns raised by certain sections of the Muslim communities we attempted to engage deserve urgent attention as they are central to successful engagement with these sections of the African heritage Muslim communities. As a research team, we came to the conclusion that dealing with these issues was beyond the scope of this research due to time constraints and lack of resources; consequently some significant people who could have added value to the whole research did not take part; additionally at least two of these personalities were "gate keepers" to their communities and therefore their refusal has added weight.

As a research team, we also encountered a lot of suspicion directed at the government and the Leicester City Council. This was largely linked to some of the communities we sought to engage reacting to perceptions of being under suspicion by default of being Muslim and consequently not wanting to engage with perceived agents of the state (the researchers). In these instances, we have asserted our independence in pursuit of scientific knowledge to ameliorate the plight of the community under investigation as our principal guiding factor.

Notwithstanding these hiccups, the research team were able to mobilise adequate numbers to generate insight into the issues that are of significance to the African heritage Muslim communities in Leicester. Another component of the research process is that it has been able to develop five trained community researchers, who are now able to conduct research into a range of issues affecting various communities.

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# Chapter 3

## Research Findings

In this chapter, we present the findings of the research project, highlighting the main perceptions of the research participants in relation to their concerns, positive experiences and recommendations. These are now presented as follows:

### 3.1 Positive experiences of being a Muslim in Leicester

The overwhelming majority of participants in all the three focus groups expressed positive experiences of living in Leicester as Muslims. This was largely attributed to the vibrant and thriving Muslim community in Leicester, where Islam is very visible in the high number of mosques in Leicester and in its visible manifestation; where one could feel and breathe Islam. This is further enhanced by the availability of the necessarily ingredients of Islam like halal shops, mosques, madrasahs and vibrant Muslim communities. The following accounts from respondents illustrate this point:

*“I think generally good environment for easy practice of the Muslim religion, with mosques, halal shops and the open society where everybody seems to find a group and sense of belonging. Alhamdulillah (Praise be to Allah) I have a good experience in Leicester ....I was not born in Leicester but came by the age of 10 so I can feel a sense of belonging, finding almost everything a Muslim may need, food wise, mosque, brotherhood influence, gaining a lot compared to other Muslims in other parts of England. I have family in other parts of England and compared to my county I have a lot more than them”. (Female, Young Muslim Focus Group)*

*Respondent 1: Well I came to Leicester in 2006, started a law degree in University of Leicester, at first Leicester was not my first choice but when I found out that Leicester has a strong Muslim community; the university has a prayer room, that there were many mosques close by especially in Evington road. I guess that was a good impression as a Muslim when you see that there is a strong Muslim community, you feel comfortable and especially as a student you feel more at home....*

*Respondent 2: I think, I will add to that, in Leicester there is a visible Islam, so coming in here is a bit reassuring even if it is just seeing lots of Muslims, lot of mosques, people in hijab and people you can actually say Salaam to” (Born African focus group)*

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Some participants gave testimonials of being welcomed and supported as Muslims; a revert to Islam gave the example of other Muslims welcoming her and being given food by neighbours during Ramadhan:

*“In Leicester, the street I live on is predominantly Muslim and when they recognised that I was Muslim, it took them a while but they were all very inclusive.*

Researcher: *Example of how inclusive they were to you.*

Respondent: *For example during Ramadan I barely cook because I get food on regular basis. When my son had to go to madrasah, he got actually led across the road. Once someone realise that I am Muslim, they always stop and talk to me.”* [Female Muslim revert]

The overall feeling of being a Muslim in Leicester was that of a convivial environment which engendered a sense of belonging; belonging to the Islamic Ummah. This feeling of belonging, acceptance and “normality” of Islam was seen in sharp contrast to the experiences of a significant number of the respondents who have lived elsewhere before settling in Leicester. Two such respondents who lived in Holland and Germany respectively where they neither felt a sense of belonging nor experience “normality” as Muslims gave the following accounts:

Respondent: *I was not born in Leicester, came here in 2003/4 and was seeing so many advantages they had compared to me living in Holland then. In Holland they will call you names and tease you to leave the jobs, mend for your children, since you are occupying jobs their sons and daughters could have done* [Female Dutch national of Somali origin, 25, Young People Focus Group].

Respondent: *For my own experience, being a Muslim in Leicester. “Wullai” I was living in Germany before I come to here, worst than here to be honest. May be that is why in the beginning it is difficult for me to see the bad side or whatever racism or so, because if you have been somewhere where the racism threshold is much higher...* [Former resident of Germany, Gambian national, Born African focus group].

Overall, living in Leicester has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for the respondents in all the focus groups; however there have been challenges identified as well to be dealt with in the next sections.

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### 3.2 Intersectionality: race, religion, gender, nationality and age

MA: *When it comes to the challenge because I live far away from city centre and live more with whites. My challenges are more linked to being black at par with being Muslim. Especially with the kids, my younger son he is now 8, at times he comes home and now says mum "I wish I am white". Sometimes he comes home and say mummy why am I black (focus group respondents shaking their heads in what appears to be sorrow). So I need to sit him down and explain to him that Allah created us in the form we are, there is nothing wrong with that, you should be proud with what skin you are. There is nothing different in you. It is just like a white child asking why he is white. You can't change that. He says ooh. "All my friends don't want to play with me because I am black". In the school I think there are no more than them two black kids in the school and my daughter is the only one in Hijab. ALHAMDULILAH She is stronger than the brother (Mother, Born African Focus Group).*

The above quote illustrates that the focus of analysis in relation to issues that affect African heritage Muslims is not only limited to their religious orientation, but inextricably linked to their constructed notions of self and identity is interwoven their ethnicity. Therefore to speak of their religion implies location of this symbiotic relationship between ethnicity and religion as evidenced by the lenses of analysis the plight of the above children can be understood from.

Therefore socially constructed demarcations of difference can often be seen through single lenses of oppression, for example focusing exclusively on women, Muslims or Black/ethnic minorities. Intersectionality (see Crenshaw 1994 for example) as a sociological theory holds that these constructed notions of difference can impact on a particular group simultaneously, resulting in a cumulative effect. The data emerging from the research suggests that the constructed reality of the respondents as Muslims is equally impacted by their constructed identities, whether self or externally constructed, as visible ethnic minorities of African heritage. A respondent recognises this tension even though he claims not be affected by it:

Respondent: *I embrace Islam 20 years ago in South London Brixton community which has quite a vibrant revert community there as some of you might know. The issues we faced then were not the issue of race because all of us were reverts from different African backgrounds. ...So when I came up here (Leicester) and I saw it's a different set up than in London so you got basically the Muslims divided generally on racial lines you got the Somalis, Gujuratis and the Arabs and everybody is comfortable in their own ethnic comfort zone that's natural. (Male, African Revert Focus Group)*

This is further complicated for young people and for women. For example, a young Muslim woman is affected because they are Muslim, because they are young, because they are Black and because they are also female and all of these

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constructions do not operate in isolation; their coming together means that their location both within the African heritage community and the Muslim communities in constant interaction exposes tensions. This scenario can be further complicated by adding other variables like immigration status and nationality. This intersectionality is manifested in some instances, in stereotypes of African heritage people being used as a lens through which to judge African heritage Muslims; even though a Muslim identity might be the most salient identity for some African heritage Muslims.

*Respondent: I think that any person who reverted in the 80's would be a liar if they said that the whole thing about how can you be a Muslim and you are black or you have a child and you send the child to the mosque and the child comes back saying mummy, daddy, they were calling me saying I am black and I can't be a Muslim yeah. But anybody who is black in the 80's or 70s, late 70's who's been a Muslim and they say that they never heard that or it might happen to them, a friend or family or somebody or some contact. If we say that, that never happen, then we will be lying. (Male, Revert Focus Group)*

This is also illustrated by the division of the Muslim community along racial and ethnic lines and the many practices (purported to be in the name of Islam) when they are cultural. This cultural/ethnicity dimension is not only limited to Asians and non-Asian Muslims but intra-Asian as well as the following quote illustrate:

*Respondent: ... in Leicester there is a sort of peculiarity because I happen to discuss with a friend, she is a sister who is not from Leicester and she happens to be a revert which was a bit sad, she is a revert but she married a Pakistani, now she came to Leicester from Birmingham. Despite the fact that she was Asian she felt discriminated. She was Asian but on getting here she found out that because she is Pakistani and most of Muslims in Leicester are Gujarat, she always felt the difference so she was understanding with me. So I told her well, I am black so I am used to that; anywhere you are in that you know people treat me differently. It is there among the non-Muslims, the whites but its there among the Muslims as well (Female revert, Revert Focus Group)*

These constructed demarcations could be further complicated when women or young people for example are assigned specific roles in given cultural contexts but played out in the name of Islam. We will now go on to explore how the issues of gender, age and ethnicity can impact on African Heritage Muslim identity and then the cumulative effect of all of these dimensions coming together.

In all three focus groups, respondents recounted encounters of perceived discrimination from more established Muslim communities, especially from the communities of South Asian origins. A myriad of examples were given, ranging from Muslims of African and Caribbean origin not being regarded as “proper Muslims”, being perceived as different, language barrier hindering communication and not being welcomed in mosques. According to most of the respondents, this cumulative effect has lead to a sense of alienation and generated feelings of not belonging.

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## 3.2a Language barrier

Language is one of the key markers of ethnicity as it enables communication and distinguishes between one group and another; therefore it is an apt tool to illustrate the point being made. This is generally encountered in spaces of interaction, principally in mosques and especially during the hutbas when languages other than English are spoken. This point was significantly raised more strongly in the young people's focus group which has significant implications for relevant policy that seeks to engage young Muslims of African heritage. The following quotes from two respondents illustrate this:

*Respondent:... there is always a language barrier, you go to certain mosques, they speak their own language so it is like you don't feel you belong because instead of gaining from what they are talking about. You are made to look like someone within a family that you do not even exist so it causes the way of erm... erm... worshipping a bit difficult for black (Muslims) (Young Muslim Focus Group)*

In the second case; the respondent makes the same point about feeling excluded by language as follows:

*Respondent: the communication is low so you have low self esteem to go back to that place (Young Muslims Focus Group?)*

As the above quote implies, African heritage Muslims are sometimes excluded from certain mosques indirectly because of their inability to speak a particular language employed by the mosque hierarchy. A number of reasons might be responsible for this, for example where a significant number of the congregation speak an ethnic language and English is sometimes the second or third language of the congregation; then the considerations of a limited number of African heritage Muslims might not be top of the agenda. A specific example was given of a Somali mosque that traditionally gives its hutba in Arabic, which not only excluded other African heritage Muslims but also some Somali young people who are not fluent in Arabic.

Only 4 out of the 22 of the respondents we interviewed spoke Arabic and the overwhelming majority we spoke to did not speak any of the South Asian languages of origin spoken in the vast majority of mosques. There are occasions when the business of the mosques are transacted in English; the respondents however spoke of a significant number of times when they could not take part in the transactions because of language barriers, some respondents report a lack of confidence to engage.

*I have a direct example, today I went to Masjid Umar because I live right next to mosque but they speak a language I do not understand. So I like said, to go to Masjid Umar, because they are preaching in English. I went there and unfortunately the guy was not preaching in English but the guy was saying something very interesting and I can see from the faces of the people looking and listening, I moved next to the guy sitting next to me and I said can you please tell me a bit about what the guy is saying and he said no, no, no, and he moved (Male, Young Muslim Focus Group)*

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## 3.2b Not belonging

A number of respondents from across the three focus groups implied that there is a sense of not being made to feel as they belong to the Muslim community in Leicester and this is largely linked to their ethnicity as African heritage people. This is largely linked to a continuous and negative questioning of their Muslim identity by dint of the assumption that one cannot be both Black and Muslim; based on the stereotypical assumption that it contradicts “normality”. Two examples are given below; one of a young Muslim being asked to recite a verse from the Quran to prove that he is Muslim and the other of a revert’s presence in a mosque being questioned:

Respondent 1: *“When I was in the secondary school I told my friends I was Muslim and they would not believe me. I felt like I don’t belong. I never love going to mosques again which I was enjoying then but this kind of mild perception that am black such that the Asian feel it was not right for me to be Muslim actually contributed immensely to losing my love for mosque hence they (Asians) are dominant”.*

Respondent 2: *“When I was young my Asian friend said I can’t be Muslim because am Caribbean”*

Respondent 3: *“Really? Did they ask you to read a Sura?”* (Young asked Muslim Focus Group)

In the second example, a male revert said:

*You could go to the mosque, like I could go to the mosque. I remember when I first started going to the mosque, and some people used to come up to me and say what are you doing in here? Why are you coming in here? And I just thought I am Muslim right and it was really, really funny and awkward... I started seeing a number of things like xxxxxxx was saying as us being looked as we are not really Muslims and how can you be Muslim? You are black!”* (Male, Revert Focus Group)

In trying to explain why this is the case, some of the respondents advanced the explanation of cultural differences and the construction of an African heritage identity based on stereotypical assumptions. A number of other examples were given such as a lack of African heritage Muslim role models in madrasahs where differences in culture; between Muslims of South Asian origin and those of African heritage might be the key factor at play, rather than their constructed identities as Muslims. Linked to this point, at least three respondents in the young people’s focus group spoke of smacking in madrasahs as contrary to how they were brought up and one of those young people gave an example of how he was never smacked at home but got smacked in the madrasah as a result of which he retaliated and was excluded.

*When I was in the school where I was the only black Caribbean in my class my friends can’t still believe I was a Muslim and one day got smacked in the madrasah by the Asian teacher which I could not comprehend hence in my culture that was not accepted. So I flicked out, I was learning and enjoying. (Young Muslim Focus Group)*



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### 3.2c Getting it from the Black Community as well

Respondents from all three focus groups, and entirely in the revert focus group, spoke of being treated negatively by the Black community as well as other communities. These examples range from being given “dirty looks”, people making comments in their presence and generally being treated as delinquent because of their choices of becoming Muslims (this also came from their own relatives). This negative experience disproportionately affected women who could be visibly identified as Muslims, especially whilst wearing the hijab or veil.

*Respondent 4: I'll say Leicester is a good place to live. (However) The first time I experience racism in Leicester was from a black lady. It was on the bus. I sat beside her and she goes “ooh ooh” asking the other lady to give her perfume or something. What is the problem here? I am as black as you are (focus group respondents express surprised). So that was the first time I experienced racism.*

Respondents (at the same time): *said that clearly due to your Hijab*

*Respondent 5: because you wear Hijab and if you did not possibly she might not have done that. That was the first time I experience racism in Leicester (Female, Born African Focus Group)*

### 3.2d Spaces for women in the mosque

A consistent theme running through all the focus groups is that of women not being allowed in some mosques. This was especially important for the focus group of born Muslims and that of the reverts. Respondents identified only 4 mosques out of Leicester's 29 mosques that admitted women on their premises. Opinion was divided amongst respondents particularly within the aforementioned focus groups as to whether this was as a result of particular mosques following particular schools of thought or based on cultural practices imported from countries of origin. Whatever the basis of exclusion in some mosques, women respondents spoke of the need to be able to go into mosques, to pray and be part of a communion.

*Though there are many mosques, there are not many where women can go to, that's not very good, at least there were few even though Islam was visible, in terms of mosque, the restrictions in the ones women can go does affect people. Imagine coming to this program, this forum and may be “Salat” meet you up at some point, you are really stuck as where you need to pray. There are numerous mosques within walking distance. Although there is only one closer to here but that is one of the exceptions. So I will say that's one of things there. (Female, Born African Heritage Focus group)*

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## 3.2e Children are more vulnerable

A number of respondents, including young people, fathers and mothers stated that African heritage Muslims face a whole raft of negative experiences; however these are disproportionately visited on children who are in the processes of forming their identity and therefore can be more vulnerable to negative experiences affecting their self esteem and construction of social reality. Two examples illustrate this point: first, there is the incident of the African Caribbean heritage 15 year old boy who told his South Asian origin school mates that he is Muslim and he was constantly asked to recite suras from the Quran to prove that he is Muslim. This experience constantly left him feeling that it was abnormal to be Black and Muslim and greatly affected his ability to practice the religion. Second there is the example of the mother fearing the impact of these negative experiences on her children:

*Respondent: I don't know, we came into Islam because of anybody other than Allah so in some respects, it doesn't matter. In some respects it does matter especially if you have got young children, they need to be able to tap into what's there and feel part of the community. When you got young children that revert like when you revert sometimes it's kind of like they are more important because they got so many family members who are non Muslims. So if they're Muslims and Muslims are giving them a hard time it's kind of like gives them a chance and they might turn on their heels and be like I don't want be a Muslim because look how they are treating me. Maybe it's not so bad now especially in the early days. (Mother, Revert Focus Group)*

## 3.2f The cumulative effect

What has become evident in this section and throughout the research is that to understand the needs of African heritage Muslims demands a location of ethnicity as an active interacting dimension of their constructed identity; additional layers of social stratification become more evident as gender, age and other dimensions are entered into the mix. To then speak of a singular religious identity without putting into play the intersectionality of their lives is to start from a wrong premise in attempting to understand and construct policies for them.

## 3.3 Challenges to practising Islam as an African Heritage

### Muslim in Leicester

Respondents from across the focus groups raised a number of challenges they face in Leicester as Muslims trying to practice Islam to the best of their ability. These challenges recounted through the research include: lack of credible and dependable Islamic Knowledge, lack of self organisation in some sections of the African heritage Muslim communities, matrimonial issues, lack of visible Black role models, Muslim as a constructed category under suspicion, discrimination in mosques and aggressive preachers.

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### 3.3a Lack of credible and dependable Islamic knowledge

Lack of credible and dependable Islamic knowledge e.g. separating cultural practices from religion or basic Islamic knowledge on nikab and prayers especially for reverts has been identified as a challenge. Young people and reverts especially, explained how being new to the religion and in need of Islamic knowledge/guidance can be really tricky as a wide range of views, with all of them often claiming to be the true version can be very difficult to decipher. An Islamic knowledge reference point is needed to offer guidance and especially for the young as the young people's focus group also significantly raised this point:

*Respondent: the challenges, is a lot really because I'm a new Muslim and it's kind of hard the challenges that I face particularly its just, for instance, knowing the difference between culture and religion, that's the main difference because I am a new Muslim that's what kind of challenges me because I'm kind of stuck between ok is that how you do it or is that your culture.*

*Researcher: give me an example to help me understand.*

*Respondent: For instance going to different sisters and learning differences on how to pray although obviously pray for a certain way for example some people say do not Nikhab when you pray; some people say Tasbiat as some people say you can and some people say you can't, just different ways of praying. I do not know the difference whether it's actual prayer or is it culture for certain reasons I don't know or certain people say you should wear a Nikhab and a full Abaya, some say just as long as dress fully from head to toes then that's ok, I don't know I guess it's different." (Female, Revert Focus Group)*

*Researcher: Can I check then one of the issues that is coming out is that.. young Muslims (pause) would like a place where they can get proper knowledge rather than every Tom, Dick and Harry telling them this and that but having a good point of reference where scholars or people who can talk to you.*

*AW: I think that's what the young, the Islamic youth need coz we grown up in this stateless London, I am from London, the children, they are lost, they are lost, they are lost and they need Islamic hands to guide them, they really do. (Female, Young Muslim Focus Group)*

This point is further buttressed:

*Another issue as well is sometimes, you come to the deen and there is a lot of confusion, I remember hanging with Sufis, Selafis, Murabitunes, Tubligies, like going through so many different groups. You go to one group and I hear like xxxx was saying, someone would say to you this is the way, and you go to another group and someone would say this is the way and sometimes they like saying they are on the right path and everyone else is on the wrong path so this is what you need to do. So you research a bit more then you are, hang on a minute, then you have another group saying that. So sometimes you become so kind of like not sure that you stop mixing. So me now, before every circle, I was at them, now, I rather sit at home with my books and that's how very much I do things now but I do not go out as much as I used to because sometimes you come back confused, you know. (Revert Focus Group)*

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### 3.3b Self Organisation of African Muslim Communities

A respondent raised the point of the failure of the African Caribbean community to organise itself as a significant challenge. He argued on many occasions that the African Caribbean community was one of the first to settle in Leicester but this opportunity was not best utilised to build social and physical structures for the benefit of African heritage people, especially Muslims in this case. However this point should also take into consideration that other communities, such as the Somali communities, have been successful in mobilising and building mosques and other social and physical structures.

### 3.3c Matrimonial concerns

The respondents across the three focus groups expressed a range of concerns that affected them as Muslims living in Leicester and these range from concerns from parents as to whether their children will be able to marry into the religion. This is also linked to the question of whether Muslim reverts will be able to get Muslim wives. As Islam states that Muslim women can only marry Muslim men, this point of finding a suitable person with the right religious background was raised especially in the revert focus group. It was suggested repeatedly that setting up a matrimonial service to this effect might be the best way forward. It was also recognised that language and cultural barriers can significantly affect inter-ethnic marriage between Muslims of different ethnicities.

*Because, I put it to you, majority of the mosques with the Indian or Somali mosque or whatever, you as a black man, if you are black woman, right, you probably have a better squeeze or better opportunity alright. But you as a black man, you try and go to a mosque and say to them that, brother I am looking to get married and then you start getting all the language barriers, start having all the cultural barriers and that like you are going to find it extremely difficult (Male, Revert Focus Group).*

A concerned father also expressed this point:

*How they are going to fit in or for example who they are going to marry, you see. This is going to be the issue, although I have gone through the journey, they are going to have to go through it you know. I am going to have to take my children out of the city to find spouses? Who is going to be the right minded Muslim who will raise them like how I want them to be raised? That's going to be, that's more of the worry as for myself. (Father, Revert Focus Group)*

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### 3.3d Visible Black Muslim Role Models

It was suggested in all three focus groups that there is a lack of visible Black Muslim role models to inspire young people. The Black Muslim role models are needed to guide young people to the right path using strategies rooted in Islam to tackle issues young African heritage Muslims might be confronted with.

*Challenges, I think there is a big challenge to the young people, I think that the biggest fears now, I know my boys are quite big now but yet even still, you kind of worry because, the kind of things for them to tap into. It's like when you go to places like Birmingham, London, if you have got teenage boys that have probably fell on the wrong side of the law, and they might kind of keep them in check you find in other cities. Because I have got aunts in Birmingham and relatives in London as well, and what you tend to find in those cities is, if you are Afro Caribbean, you are male with issues, it's probably like say you know, maybe you are a single parent you can say brother, my son's having problems can you try talk to him? In Leicester there is not many, I don't know about now, but I know that as I was growing up through the deen, there is no kind of role models that really want to tap in and deal with young people... I do not see them kind of tackling the young Muslim males, not only African Caribbean but just the young kind of Muslim males that are becoming criminalised and there is just nothing to do with them. (Female, Revert Focus Group)*

### 3.3e Under suspicion as a Muslim

The point was made during all three focus groups that being Muslim by default is a category under suspicion. That given the events after 9/11 and 7/7, there has been a media hysteria generated that categorised Muslims as persons under suspicion; this issue is conflated with the stereotypes some sections of communities hold about African heritage people as dubious people of criminal intent; these suspicions and stereotype do not only come from other sections of the communities in Leicester who are non Muslims; but also from certain sections of the Muslim communities.

### 3.3f Aggressive preachers off putting

The point of encountering aggressive preachers was particularly made by the revert and young people focus groups respectively. These encounters were with preachers who espoused a dogmatic and hard-line view of Islam, which these preachers go on to ram down the throat of anyone within their vicinity. A significant number of respondents from the earlier mentioned focus groups, more so the young people's focus group found it very off putting and a discredit to the great religion of Islam. Some of the respondents suggested that Islamic preaching must increasingly be cognisant of the European environment in which it operates and that there cannot be compulsion in religion. A young man illustrates this frustration in the following quote:

*The Imam was calling the kutba (summons) and he was so aggressive about the Pakistani war. He was so aggressive. I said I wouldn't go back there (Male, Young Muslim Focus Group).*

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### 3.3g Discrimination/ Racism in mosques

A number of respondents recounted incidences where they have been directly or indirectly discriminated because of their race and ethnicity. This is contrary to the teachings of Islam which promotes an Ummah, a universal brotherhood in which all men and women are equal, regardless of their ethnicity and racial origins. In all the focus groups but especially the reverts and born Muslim focus groups, examples were given of African heritage Muslims not returning to certain mosques due to the perceived discrimination meted out to them. A sense of not belonging and not being accepted is often spoken of. An active advocate of Islam gives testament to this point:

Respondent: *They come into this masjid and they leave Islam because they feel they won't be accepted in that masjid. And they come in a masjid and they leave Islam and this happened here.*

Researcher: *Why would they leave Islam? Because they are treated differently?*

Respondent: *Yes, I swear, Wallahi, even the people that have took Islam shahada in my hand, if you talk to most of them; they accepted Islam but they won't come to the masjid.*

Researcher: *Because they feel they won't be accept?*

Respondent: *Yes, they feel they won't be accepted.*

## 3.4 (Examples of discrimination)

### 3.4a Stereotype and racial discrimination

In relation to discrimination experienced by African heritage Muslims, the experiences shared reverberated throughout the three focus groups, more especially in the respondents of the revert focus group. Respondents spoke of people's initial perception of them being negative from the wider communities in Leicester but more specifically from the Black community. Respondents spoke of encountering episodes where some members of the Black community demonstrated some misunderstanding of Islam and in some instances equated it to a pagan religion.

*... well yeah, when I first became a Muslim, I hang with the brothers then, I know that our own Caribbean people who didn't know what Islam was, were basically seeing us like you know, my auntie was saying that I am in a pagan religion and I was saying `Wallahi` it's not like that at all, right. So what I am saying is that there is a huge amount of ignorance in our community in relation to that and when we know that our own sons and daughters have become Muslims they would be thinking, how come they want to be Pakistani? How come they want to become Indian, alright that's one type of discrimination you will get and the discrimination we've been speaking about since ... which is from those other people who have been saying that or call themselves Muslims (Male, Revert Focus Group)*

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Respondents further spoke of some members of the wider community, including Black and South Asian Muslim communities demonstrating attitudes that raise the question whether one can be Black and Muslim; an implication that it is not synonymous. Some respondents as reverts to Islam also spoke of their conversion being linked to transformation whilst in prison; these are also linked to stereotypes of Black people, as the earlier section on intersectionality illustrated; linked to stereotypes of Blacks as drug dealers and where discrimination is based on race. Respondents also spoke of Muslims of other ethnic origins not saying back salaams (greetings) because “they do not want to engage with you”.

### 3.4b The women

Women respondents in all three groups spoke of negative stereotypes of Muslim women being propagated in the media and in wider society. These stereotypes of Muslim women being oppressed; disadvantaged; Muslim women are supposed to stay at home and have babies; forced to wear the hijab and without voices were scenarios the respondents came across in their daily lives and these were also largely seen as unhelpful constructions of the Muslim woman who wears the hijab out of their own volition and are successful in their own right as evidenced by the presence of a medical doctor, solicitor and Racial Equality Advisor in the various focus groups. However it was also acknowledged in the focus groups that there is a need for some sections of the African heritage Muslim community to be more open to the idea and supportive of their women folk attending university.

### 3.4c Employment

As African heritage Muslims, four of the respondents felt that in their search for jobs, religion was used as a marker to appoint them or not to appoint them. These respondents spoke of a number of interviewers being visibly shocked when they have turned up with their hijabs or their religious orientation being brought in during the interviews. All four felt that being Muslim had an influence in not getting the jobs.

*I give you an example, there was one care worker job that I applied for, and they asked for your religion and Islam was there and I just thought ok I'm a Muslim ,Islam, you know, you don't hear anything. I thought to myself why did they ask (that for a) support worker, what is the relevance of it? (Male, Revert Focus Group)*

Respondents also spoke of feeling discriminated because of their religion in a number of ways. Two respondents who work for the Leicester City Council gave examples: the first spoke of being told by a member of the public that I don't want to deal with people like you (meaning Muslim). The second one who works in a Children's Home recounted continuous examples of catering in staff events not taking his halal needs into consideration to the extent that he is always forced to bring his own food.

*I work closely with street homeless people and I am at the front desk so they all buzz the door and they come in and they can't see me at that moment they are in and the minute they look up and it doesn't matter what they are on, they are like, one person comes up to me “I do not want to deal with people like you”. (Female, Young Muslim Focus Group)*

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In the second example, an employee of the Leicester City Council gives the following account:

Respondent: *I mean working in the City Council with children, one of the main policies is that anti-discriminatory policy ...*

Researcher: *what do you mean?*

Respondent: *because I am a Muslim, because I do not eat their pork and stuff like that I don't eat their things or foods and they know that I am a Muslim but they don't order halal food.*

Respondent 2: *Astargfullah!*

Respondent: *and the chef would cook and they would say if you do not want it go make your own food and cook or bring your own food.*

### 3.4d Physical manifestation of discrimination

#### palpable invisibility

The respondents across the three focus groups spoke of encountering perceived discrimination from members of the general public. These range from being stared at to the extreme of being given “dirty looks” because of their appearance (scarf and hijab). Whilst these eventualities are rare in some instances, these manifested instances are often reflected in public reaction and body language; which might seem innocuous to the onlooker, but are perceived by the respondents as palpable invisibility; behaviour they can feel and touch but which might not be visible to the onlooker. More visible instances include a man, whilst walking in the street with his wife (who was wearing a hijab) being told “We are not in Kanderharr here”; being stared at whilst attending mosques and being called “paki”, which demonstrates a level of racial and religious conflation of a constructed problem. The incident of the man walking in town with his wife is explained below:

*But once, I walked in the city centre with my wife and she was wearing a “Jilbaab”, I think we were going to the “Eid” festival. I remember a white man coming to me and said you are not in “Kandahar” here. That was the first time I ever heard in Leicester someone saying something about Muslims. So that means it's there. (Male, Born Muslim Focus Group)*



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### 3.4e Discrimination when spreading Islam - the bananas and the monkey noises

At least four of the respondents spoke of taking part in outreach programmes to spreading Islam by holding public events and canvassing the public. Whilst most members of the public did not engage with these respondents in a civil manner; the respondents however spoke of receiving vitriolic attacks manifested physically and psychologically. These reactions including being told to go home, being spat at, in one instance a respondent reported bananas being thrown at them and another reported monkey noises being made. The above reported, according to the affected respondents were made by people who have perceived them as the threat of Islamisation. These reactions, especially in relation to the bananas and monkey noises, known symbols of racism, again illustrates the intersectionality of the position of African heritage Muslims who are judged significantly on the basis of their constructed racial/ethnic identity as well as their religious one.

*Respondent: From non-Muslim for example, I am a man I give "Dawa". I stand at city centre to give "Dawa" there*

*Researcher: can you clarify what is "Dawa" for those who don't understand?*

*Respondent: Dawa is invitation, to invite people into Islam, so this is basically what I do most of the time and I have many experience people coming there, they spit on me*

*Researcher: They spit on you?*

*Respondent: Yeah some of them put their banana on my table, they call me go home. There are a lot of experiences (negative), I cannot name all. But you know am doing that for the sake of Allah. That's the command of the creator, I have to be patient.*

### 3.4f Discrimination within the mosques

The discrimination that respondents spoke of, was not only one experienced from the wider communities in Leicester, but also from within various Muslim communities who were not necessarily of African heritage. There were encounters when respondents felt that they were discriminated on the basis they went to a mosque where they did not belong to the dominant sect. Respondents also spoke of being turned away from certain mosques and of being asked to go to the back rows; respondents also reported encounters where they were told that the prayers will not be led at the Mosque by a Black man or be the last to lead the prayer because they are the least knowledgeable. Two respondents recounted stories of the public admonition of reverts which led to attendance of those two ceasing. The issue of Muslims not replying to salaams in the mosque, or replying reluctantly and in a low voice was also construed as discrimination. Overall, there was a perception by some of the respondents that they were made to feel inferior.

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### 3.4g Miscellaneous

A number of respondents from the Born Muslim African heritage focus group spoke of difficulties in getting their children accepted in madrasah and there was a perception of discrimination in not being allowed in madrasah because of their ethnic and racial differences, even though they were Muslims

A parent in the Born African focus group also spoke of a deliberate attempt by a particular school to take the scarf off her daughter in school. She believed that members of staff from the school were trying to do this unjustifiably and resisted it as she deemed it an affront to her religious identity.

*I know the first time I took her to the school, the first week the teacher came up to me and say mm we doing oral lessons today I think xxxxx (your daughter) have some problem understanding, I think it is because the head scarf (focus group attendants: all amused at the scene !!! and laughed). I said really but she hears perfectly well when we talk to her. I said don't you think maybe she's struggling with the accent. She said oh I don't know it was just an observation. I just wanted to know if it's ok to take off the scarf when we are having those types of lessons. I said well, I don't think that hinders her hearing but let me find out from her. Then I said to her "sweetie pie" do you really think we should take off your scarf. She said no don't take off my scarf, I heard her and I answered (we all smiled). She (teacher) said probably I think there might be a misunderstanding, children blah blah blah*

## 3.5 Culture and Islam: Points of Convergence and Divergence

### 3.5a Lack of cohesion

Respondents from the three focus groups, especially the born Muslims and the reverts stated that the Muslim communities in Leicester were not homogeneous and that to some extent different sections of the Muslim communities keep to themselves. Consequently there are many instances when a distinction between culture and Islam are not made to the extent that the line becomes blurred. Respondents in the born Muslim and revert categories spoke of disunity within the African Muslim communities as well, for example between Somalis and other African heritage Muslims. However whilst this disharmony was noted by the young people's focus group, they were less likely to be influenced by the divisions of the old ways as their constructed notions of otherness are more fluid in the age of changing identities. Respondents from all the three focus groups spoke of perceived discrimination either directly or indirectly from other sections of the Muslim communities in Leicester as well as cataloguing a plethora of examples from the wider community. This is not only something witnessed from the general public but

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within their workplaces as well at times. Two different respondents illustrate this point of lack of cohesion in the following quotes. The first quote is in relation to a young Muslim's perception of the wider community:

*I think these people try to bring their culture into Islam which isn't right. They mix culture with Islam which makes me have problems with them. (Male, Young Muslim Focus group)*

This second one is about young Muslims breaking barriers:

*There are problems of disunity within black Muslims due to differences in our cultures, languages, etc but as Muslims, we should put those differences aside and move on. (Young People Focus Group)*

### **3.5b Lack of Islamic knowledge**

A key theme running throughout the research is the need for authentic Islamic knowledge and reliable interpretation of Islamic teachings. Respondents across the three focus groups gave accounts of being given contradictory claims of knowledge and raise concerns about the difficulty of deciding which interpretation to trust. Whether Muslims should watch TV was given by a male respondent in the young people's focus group as an example of an issue subjected to many interpretations.

The nexus between culture and Islam was also a continues running theme throughout, where the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and religion impact people's construction of social reality and invariably the way in which they interacted with the world based on collective cultural realities, including stereotypes. A significant number of respondents also stated that some of perceived earlier on highlighted differences might be due to cultural difference. The following quotations illustrate this point:

*I have seen cultures taking over Islam, some people are arguing that I should wear a burka which is culture. In the time of the prophet he kept quiet about it but it's not written in any book that I should wear it and must be black hijab, though it emphasized the use of the undersigned ones and can't attract attention (Female, Young Muslim Focus group)*

*....things have just come in Islam and the way over like 10 years at least, yeah like things from culture. Like people are starting to believe that its part of Islam when it's not, it's something separate but it's been drilled into the little kids and when they grow up they preach it and when they grow up they preach it so it becomes normal (Female, Young Muslim Focus Group).*

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### 3.6 Resistance and Struggle: Taking action to change the way things are

What has come across throughout the three focus groups is the resilience of the African heritage Muslim communities, whether born Muslim or reverts, in coming out with coping strategies and getting on with business in the face of perceived discrimination and disadvantage. Three examples of resistance advanced include: individual members of the African heritage Muslim communities taking the initiative to translate the *kutba* into English where this is done in a language that African heritage Muslims do not understand to promote access and inclusivity. Related to the point of access and inclusivity, members of the African heritage communities also prevailed upon mosque committees to invite speakers who could preach in English as well as doing *nasihah* in languages other than the spoken languages in those specific mosques. Young people especially spoke of not letting the politics of the old determine how they interacted with people, especially Muslims from other communities. A number of respondents, especially in the revert focus group spoke of taking it upon themselves to educate themselves about the *deen* through various means and to the extent of going to Arabic countries to learn about true Islam. Although these were strong examples of resistance, only about 20% of respondents gave examples of resistance and a significant number were not sure how to deal with the challenges of negative experiences and some stopped going to specific mosques because of these challenges and not being welcomed.

*...like recently, there is new Somali mosque opened, in the Masjid, so after the first talk, kutba, they were talking in Arabic, so I gave them some advice, say you got to translate this kutba as we have got people here from different races and background and they don't understand Arabic and so let me translate it and summarise it for you. So I started to do this and started to bring in people to do talks in English. Now they have more confidence in me and they are like you can do whatever you want in the mosque as regards to talks and here's a key. Not that they are going to accept me in their racial group as such as they are very tribal but they have just opened it up for those people who wanted to do something rather than take a back stage, sort of say these people are racist and they may well be but I think that you will really have to push what you want from the community.*

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# Chapter 4

## Conclusion and recommendations

The research process highlights that Leicester remains a very good place of habitation for Muslims in general and African heritage Muslims in particular. This is largely due to the convivial atmosphere of tolerance and religious diversity inherent in the city. However a number of crucial issues have been raised as part of the research process and we therefore make the following recommendations:

### 4.1 General Recommendations

- a. The research demonstrates that gatekeepers play a cardinal role in the lives of African heritage Muslims; in this light we recommend that both statutory and voluntary organisations explore ways of engaging the gatekeepers (in the Muslim communities) as they hold valuable knowledge but in a way that does not make them sole custodians and exclude large sections of the affected communities.
- b. The research has many accounts of African heritage Muslims' perception of being discriminated both within and outside Leicester's Muslim communities. First, we recommend that mosques employ more inclusive practices towards African heritage Muslims in order to counter perceptions of discrimination. This might include dismantling language barriers in mosques; for example mosques to publish timetables of regular English slots or have a couple of dedicated mosques that preach in English as the lingua franca so as not to alienate. Second, that awareness sessions around religious tolerance are promoted and the laws around discrimination are given more attention.
- c. The research findings suggest that African heritage Muslim children and young people are especially vulnerable to a range of factors like struggling for "true knowledge of Islam", perceived discrimination from both other sections of the Muslim community and other faiths, in addition to those experienced by other children and young people; we recommend that programmes need to be put in place to support them in their stages of identity development.
- d. One of the key findings emerging from this research is that a significant portion of African heritage Muslims, especially reverts and young Muslims, struggle in choosing the correct version of Islamic knowledge, in an atmosphere of many competing voices. In this light, we recommend the development of knowledge reference centres as a first stop shop and where this exists, then promote its location and services. This might also include the creation of credible and dependable Islamic knowledge banks and resources.
- e. Given the significant level of perceive discrimination reported in the research either directly or indirectly against African heritage Muslims, we recommend that Faith groups and forums, tackle some of the negative and misinformed ideas about Islam and racial identity.
- f. This research has been an exploratory one and our conclusions reveal that much more research needs to be conducted in greater depth and width.

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## 4.2 Statutory organisations

- a. There were some examples of Leicester City Council employees being subjected to perceived discrimination; we therefore recommend that policies are developed and mechanisms put in place to implement and monitor respect for religions diversity.
- b. This research is only a small exploratory study; we recommend a wider study with a more representative sample size; with a greater exploration of the Somali community.
- c. A key theme running throughout the research is the intersectionality of a range of variables that impact on the constructed identities of African heritage Muslims; Leicester City Council, Muslim organisations/mosques and the African heritage Muslim community should take into consideration the intersectionality of constructed identities, in designing policy strategies and development initiatives.
- d. Given the dearth of visible African heritage Muslim role models identified in the research; we recommend the identification and promotion of African heritage role models; and where they exist, then they need to be more visible, especially in mentoring the young African heritage Muslims.

## 4.3. ACCF

- a. Given the need for advocacy identified in the African heritage Muslim community, we recommend that the ACCF capacity builds the African heritage Muslim community to support them organise in order to advocate for themselves.
- b. Disseminate the research report and promote the recommendations to the widest possible audience.
- c. Given the small-scale nature of this research and lack of empiric data in this field, we recommend that ACCF explores further research on the needs of African heritage Muslims.
- d. ACCF to facilitate a forum for African heritage Muslims in collaboration with other established Muslim organisations.
- e. ACCF in collaboration with other Muslim organisations to run a seminar on addressing the needs of African heritage Muslims with Imams and other religious leaders in Leicester.

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## 4.4. Muslim associations/organisations

- a. Develop more inclusive practices that promote the participation of African heritage Muslims.
- b. Develop events and activities that bring different sections of the Ummah together
- c. Explore the possibility of setting up matrimonial services
- d. Develop mechanisms of challenging misleading preachers
- f. Develop activities that engage young Muslims using youth work methodology, with emphasis on their active involvement.
- g. Mosques should explore more inclusive practices of engaging women in the activities of the mosques, especially reverts and those of African Heritage.

## 4.5 African heritage Muslims

- a. Set up a mechanism/organisation to advocate on behalf of African heritage Muslims.
- b. Organise classes and produce resources that plug the knowledge gap identified throughout the research, especially for young people and reverts who are relatively new to Islam.
- c. Promote the visibility of African heritage role models.
- d. Explore the possibility of setting up a mosque in response to the needs identified throughout the research that are not presently being met.

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# Appendix 1

## African Heritage Muslim Research

### Focus Group Interview

Date:                      Venue:                      Time:                      No:

#### Introduction

The African Caribbean Citizen's Forum has been contracted by the Leicester City Council to deliver a piece of research that would be community based, increase knowledge around Leicester's Muslim African and African Caribbean Communities (including reverts and young people); and identify challenges that face these communities, being Muslim in Britain today. A lead researcher and 5 community researchers have been recruited to carry out this task.

In this light, this focus group is being conducted to seek your views. This focus group should take about one hour and everything you say will be treated anonymously unless you give expressed permission for your views to be acknowledged publicly. This focus group interview will be recorded with your permission and you have the option to withdraw from the interview at any stage. The data generated will be securely stored in locked cabinets and only used for research and publication purposes. If you need further information about this project, please contact:

#### Momodou Sallah

Lead Researcher

African Caribbean Citizens Forum  
ACCF Melbourne Centre  
Melbourne Road, Leicester, Leicestershire, UK LE2 0GU  
Tel: 0116 253 0947  
Email: muslim.Research@accforum.co.uk

1. What is your experience as a Muslim living in Leicester?
2. What challenges do you face as a Muslim living in Leicester?
3. Have you ever felt discriminated due to your religion? YES /NO
4. Could you explain how?
5. Have you faced any problem accessing public services (e.g. housing, education etc) in your community as a Muslim?
6. Can you give any typical example?
7. Are there any improvements or changes you would like to see?
8. Have you ever felt any form of harassment or discrimination due to your ethnicity?
9. Can you explain how?
10. How are you perceived by your fellow Muslims who are not from the same background as you? (explore whether different religious background or sect plays a part in access or denial to Muslim organisations and services)
11. Any other comments?

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## Appendix 2

### African Heritage Muslim Research Information Sheet

1. Are you born a **Muslim** or **reverted**? Circle one option
  
2. Gender **Male** | **Female** Circle one option
  
3. Age:.....
  
4. How long have you lived in Leicester? Circle one option
  - a) 0 – 12 months
  - b) 1 – 2 years
  - c) 2 – 4 years
  - d) 4 – 5 years
  - e) Above 5 year
  
5. **Ethnic origin**
  - A. Black African
  - b. Black Caribbean
  - c. Other ..... Circle one option
  
6. **Nationality:** .....
  
7. **Occupation:** employed, not-employed Circle one option
  
- 7b. If employed, please state your occupation: .....

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## Appendix 3

# Community Researchers Wanted

The African Caribbean Citizens' Forum has secured funding to look into the particular challenges that face Leicester's Muslim African and African Caribbean communities. As a result, the project is being delivered from a participatory approach and we would like to encourage interested persons to apply to take part in the project as community researchers. The project will be run from April to September 2010 and participants can expect the following.

1. To be trained in community based research approaches
2. To have the opportunity to contribute positively in gathering new knowledge
3. Paid expenses
4. Contribute to the dissemination of the research findings
5. Participants are expected to spend about 10 days on the project but this can often be broken down to 2-3 hour meetings and half day trainings (this is open to negotiation).

**If you are interested, please send a letter explaining why you want to take part in this project and a CV to:**

**Natasha Lawrence/Abdoulie Bittaye**

**Tel: 0116 253 0947**

**Postal Address:**

**ACCF Melbourne Centre**

Melbourne Road

Leicester

Leicestershire

UK, LE2 0GU

**All applications should be received on the 12th of May 2010 to be considered**

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## Appendix 4

African Heritage Muslim Research  
Training of Community Researcher

### African Caribbean Centre, Leicester

**28th May 2010**

- 10:00 – 10:15 Introduction to the day
- 10:15 – 10:30 Clarifying the research objectives
- 10:30 – 11:00 What is participatory action research?
- 11:00 - 11:45 How to conduct literature reviews?
- 11:45 – 12:00 Tea break
- 12:00 – 13:00 Choosing your methodology
- 13:00 -14:00 Lunch
- 14:00 – 16:00 Designing the research instruments
- Sampling
  - Reliability
  - Validity
  - Ethical considerations
  - Pilot study
- 16:00 – 17:00 Operationalisation/implementation of research

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## Appendix 5

# Terms

**Alhamdulillah** - praise be to Allah

**Astaghfurullah** - forgiveness from Allah

**Dawa** - call to (mainly to Islam)

**Deen** - Religion (Islam)

**Eid** - Muslim annual feast

**Halal** - Allowed / Permissible

**Hijab** - Scarf

**Jilbaab** - A traditional Arabian long gown

**Khutbah** - Friday sermon

**Madrasah** - School

**Masjid** - Mosque

**Nasiha** - Advice

**Niqab** - Face cover (for women)

**Quran** - Muslims' Holy book sent to mankind (mainly believed by Muslims)

**Ramadan** - Ninth month of the Muslim calendar (month of fasting)

**Salaam** - Short cut to say: peace be upon you (greeting)

**Salat** - Prayer

**Sufis/salafis/murabitun/Tabligies** - Names referred to certain Muslim groups

**Sura** - Chapter (in Quran)

**Tasbeeh** - Beads used during some form of worship by some Muslims

**Ummah** - Community of believers

**Wallahi** - By Allah (some people use this for swearing)

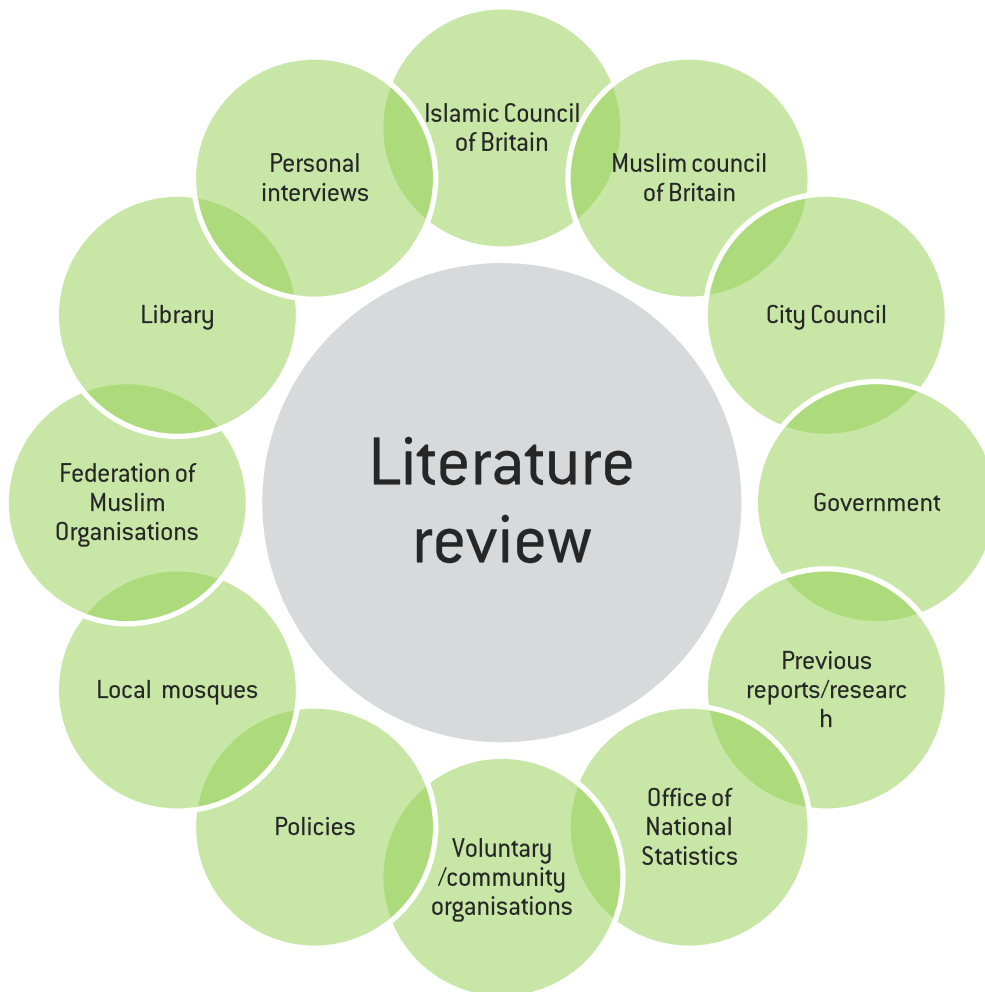
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## Appendix 6

### African Heritage Muslim Research

## Literature Review - **Where do you get the literature from?**

Sources identified by community researchers 28/05/10







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# Notes

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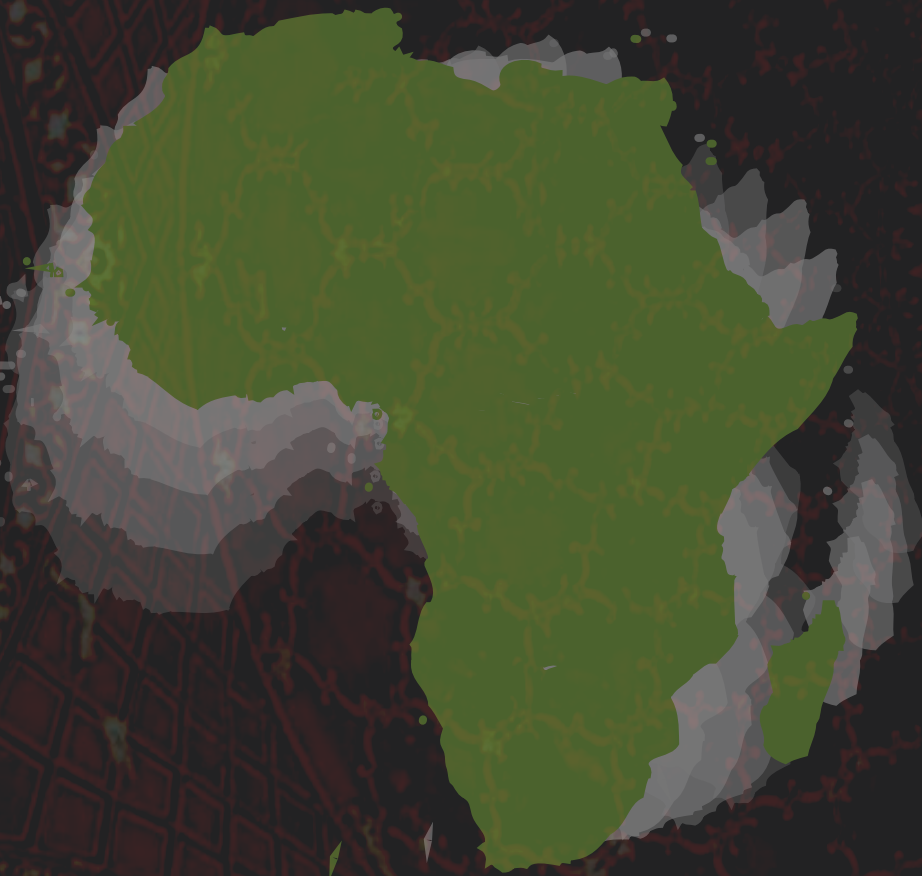
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**ACCF Melbourne Centre**

63 Melbourne Road  
Leicester  
Leicestershire  
LE2 0GU

**Tel:** 0116 253 09 47

**Email:** [info@accforum.co.uk](mailto:info@accforum.co.uk)

**web:** [www.accforum.org.uk](http://www.accforum.org.uk)

