

2012


Interview of Minister Rodney Muhammad

Rodney Muhammad

Venold Johnson

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Field Notes

Interviewer: Venold Johnson

Interviewee: Minister Rodney Muhammad (Rodney Ellis)

Interview Dates: April 27, 2012 (12:00pm-3:30pm)

May 3, 2012 (1:00pm-2:00pm)

Interview Location: Nation of Islam Mosque No. 12: 2508 N Broad St. Philadelphia, PA

Field Notes written May 4, 2012.

The Interviewee

Minister Rodney Muhammad (born Rodney Ellis) was born May 2, 1952 to Jim and Kathryn Ellis in Chicago IL. In his early childhood, he grew up the multiethnic community of South Shore in Chicago. He recounts spending time with his aunts and uncles, assisting in running his family's business, which was a nightclub in the downtown area. He remembers that most people lived in apartments during his earlier years, but that the community was relatively tight knit. While conversing about his childhood years, Mr. Muhammad depicts his parents and his family as people that were largely concerned with education. He mentioned that his father was an All-Star football player for Michigan State University and he spent some time playing for the Chicago Bears. Following his career in sports, he went into social work after being awarded his degree in sociology from Michigan State. He went to work for a program called Model Cities, which was a program that was a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty following the Civil Rights Act of 1964. His mother, Muhammad recounts, was the first black model for the Ford Company in Detroit, MI. She attended Roosevelt University and worked her way up to get a Ph.D. in Public Administration. Mr. Muhammad tells me of his experiences in high school and college and explains the mood and atmosphere of the late 60s and early 70s in Chicago. He explains the development of an epoch of black consciousness through music which had a profound impact on African-American culture in Chicago and in America. Being grown up in a household that taught him the importance of self-help and independence, Mr. Muhammad started reading up on a number of books that brought him into a new perspective on life and his future. Mr. Muhammad majored in business administration at DePaul University and excelled in the area of being an estate planner. While he was working, one of his friends asked him to attend a speech given by Louis Farrakhan at Martin Luther King High School in Chicago. Muhammad explicates how Farrakhan made parallels between biblical narrative and the state and condition of blacks in America. This fueled him to an agent in helping Minister Farrakhan achieve his goals of lifting up the masses of black people and educating them of a knowledge of self. He worked his way through the ranks of the Nation of Islam and has served as the head of Muslim Mosque No. 12 since 1991.

The Interviewer

I, Venold Junior Johnson, (b. 1986 in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica) grew up in St. Ann until I immigrated to the United States at the age of 12. I lived in Brooklyn, NY for one year and later moved to Woodbury, NJ (A suburb of Philadelphia). I earned a B.A. in History and Political Science from Lincoln University of Pennsylvania in 2009. Outside of my academic pursuits, I am also a vocal producer, a gospel recording artist, actor and an entrepreneur. I have worked with many artists such as Keyshia Cole, Stevie Wonder, Josh Groban, and a host of others. Growing up, I was always interested in history. My father made sure that I was placed in all the highest classes in high school in order to make sure that I could perform with the best of them. My AP US History teacher presented history in a light that peaked my interest. I honed my skills via many leadership positions in college such as Vice President of Pi Kappa Delta and in the position of Resident Advisor in the dormitories. Following my college experience, I took some time off to work on some of my musical undertakings. I toured as background singer for Tyler Perry's Stage Play The Have and Have Nots for two months. I also was heavily involved in church, which is where I met Mr. Johnson. Currently, I am pursuing a M.A. in history from LaSalle University.

Preparation for the Interview

Every day, I use SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) transportation system. One of the bustling transportation centers in the city is two blocks from my house, which consequently is a block or so from the graduate program that I attend at LaSalle University. On my way home from class on a March 24th and I saw these guys holding up newspapers and selling bean pies. I saw a laptop computer on the top of a newspaper stand playing a speech by Minister Louis Farrakhan. I learned about the Nation of Islam during my undergraduate years at Lincoln University. I majored in history, but I minored in black studies so I had some prior knowledge of the subject. I walked up to the guy that was holding the newspapers and I asked him all about the speeches, the meaning of the NOI flag and we had a conversation for about forty-five minutes that day. I told him about my desire to learn more about the Nation of Islam and to interview the leader of the head of the Mosque. He gave me his phone number and we communicated almost every day. Most of the times, I would just see him in passing at Broad and Olney (the transportation center). He advised me to go to the Mosque on April 1st to meet the minister. I went to the mosque and I reached there at about 9:50AM, because he had advised me to be there at 10AM. When I came into the mosque, I was greeted with the words "As-Salamu Alaykum", which means 'peace be upon you'. I entered into a room with a guy and he instructed me to remove everything out of my pockets. Upon acquiescing to his demands, he searches me thoroughly for about three minutes. After searching me, he asks me a series of questions. His first question was 'Is this your first time to the mosque and who invited you?' I said 'It is my first time to the mosque and I was invited by Bro. Nore X who operates at Broad and Olney'. His demeanor was very grave and serious. He told me that no recording is allowed and that everything was being watched in the mosque. Once I got in the main congregational area, which I assume was a sanctuary; I sat in the back and was quickly reprimanded. I did not want to cause a disturbance and I felt like an outsider. I really wanted to observe, but I was told to move to the front of the mosque. I noticed that in the mosque most of the guys wore suits with bowties and the females wore hijabs, which most African American woman call Keemars. The women were seated on the left side of the mosque and the men were seated on the right side of the mosque. I

went to the front of the mosque and sat there for about 20 minutes before a guy gets up there to address the crowd. When he gets up to address the crowd, he talks about announcements concerning the affairs of the mosque, new recruits and gave out more information. Another guy comes to the platform and speaks to the congregation about Minister Louis Farrakhan and informs them that he will be in Newark, NJ on May 4-5 to speak at a function. The cost was \$100. He emphasized how important it was to that the money for the tickets and the trip was turned in so they could see the Messenger. Following this, they held a prayer. Unlike in church, there was absolute silence and they prayed to God, Allah, and spoke of the prophets. The prayer lasted for about 5 minutes and then they announce the Student Minister, Minister Rodney Muhammad. He walks up to the podium from the back of the room and addresses the Mosque. His sermon lasted for about one hour where he talked about the Trayvon Martin case, black independence, the importance of having your own business and other things. He linked many of today's issues and the state of black people to the Children of Israel. At the end of his sermon, he comes off the platform and walks to the back of the mosque. At the end of the service, I told one of the officers (security officers) that I wanted to meet Min. Muhammad and they told me that he was busy. Then they inquired as to why I wanted to meet Min. Muhammad. I told them that I intended on doing an interview with Min. Muhammad. They told me to give them my phone number and someone would get back to me. Because I knew that the minister was a busy man, I allowed him a week to go by without going back to the Mosque. On April 9th, I saw Minister Nore X at the Olney Transportation Center and I asked him when I could expect to meet or hear from the minister. He told me that on Fridays at 1:00pm, the Minister would be in Juma prayer at the Mosque. So, that Friday, the thirteenth nonetheless, I went to the Mosque and guarded in front of the Mosque was a table. I asked the three gentlemen that I saw there if Minister Rodney was there. They said 'No'. I asked them, will he be here on Sunday? One of them responded and gravely said 'he may be here, he may not be here. Why? What's this for?' I reiterated the fact that I wanted to do an interview of Min. Muhammad and the work of the Nation of Islam (NOI) in Philadelphia. He told me that I would just have to come back on Sunday to see if he would be there or not. That Sunday, I went to the mosque and Mr. Muhammad was there, but left before I had gotten there. I didn't intend on sitting through the service again. I left my number with Bro. Oscar X and he assured me that the Minister would get back to me. I also left my proposed questions and objectives with him. On April 22nd, I went back to the mosque and Min. Muhammad preached and I waited until after the service to approach him. When I tried to go to his office, the security officers told me that he was in a meeting and would not be able to see me today. I saw Bro. Nore X at the local Chinese store at about 10pm that night and I asked him when I would be able to see the minister. He told me that the Minister holds an open Men's Study on Mondays at 7pm. This was the first time that I was able to meet and speak with the Minister face-to-face and he was more welcoming than any of the previous members I had come in contact with. I went to his office and we spoke for about fifteen minutes about the objectives of my oral history project. I assured him that this was in no way intended to hurt the Nation of Islam or the image of the Nation of Islam and that it was for scholarly research only. He gave me his number and we set up an interview for April 27, 2012. During that week, I went to the Temple University archives to see if I could pull up any information on the Nation of Islam. When I asked the librarian about the Nation of Islam, she gave me a stack of articles dealing 'Black Muslims'. I later found out that that was another name for the Nation of Islam in American culture. I found some articles on Hanafi Muslims and I also brushed up on my research of the

Nation of Islam via YouTube, the Encyclopedia, the Nation of Islam's website and through reading the Final Call (the weekly newspaper put out by the Nation of Islam). I also went to the LaSalle University library and looked up information on Minister Rodney Muhammad via the Summons link on university website. I was able to pull up some articles from online, but most of them did not include any pictures. In my oral history class and from reading *Doing Oral History* by Valerie Yow, I remember that it was important to have other primary sources such as letters, monologues and pictures to jump start the memory of the interviewee. I asked the librarian to direct me where I could get actual newspaper clippings from local Philadelphia papers and she told me that I could access the microfilm department on the lower level of the library. I went through and got the newspaper articles that I found on several databases. Using those articles and geared with information I learned from my research, I was able to pinpoint what key topics I wanted to talk about. My objective was to do as Studs Terkel did and record the voice of a minister apart of a controversial, notorious 'hate' cult/group (as some have labeled them) and leave a record of their perspective and experience through the life of this one man. I also wanted to get more information on what the Nation of Islam does in Philadelphia and a history of it. Oral history is not successful if it simply reiterates what has been said or done in the past. I chose a topic and an individual who is a religious and public figure.

Description of the Interview

We met in his office on April 27th at 1:00pm. His office is located in the back of the mosque. During the time we were meeting, there was a school that the Nation has outside. From what I could gauge when I walked pass the school located behind the congregational space, the ages of the kids were anywhere from four years old to about 10 years old. There were probably about fifty children in total. I realized this during the interview that some of the noise from the school would affect the quality of my recording, but I wasn't willing to risk missing a chance to record the minister in light of his hectic schedule. Prior to the interview, I review what the objective of my interview was and highlighted the themes of what we would be talking about. He was very obliging to my requests and we started the interview. I used the Baylor Model of questioning to 'break the ice' in starting my interview. We talked about his family, his neighborhood, and his upbringing in Chicago. At 21 minutes into the interview, his phone rings and he takes the call. We resume the interview until 1'o'clock, because he had to conduct Juma prayer. He told me to come back at 2pm and I returned at 1:59pm. I texted him to let him know that I was outside. Ten minutes later, I knocked on the door and a lady pulls back the curtain. She says 'how can I help you?' I told her that I was waiting for Minister Muhammad and I asked if he was there. She said 'He's not here right now and I can't let you in' and proceeds to shut the curtain. I knocked on the door again and I told her that I was just there an hour ago with the minister. She instructed me to wait and then the minister comes to open the door and we go back to his office to conduct the rest of the interview. His demeanor was very open and friendly. One of the troubles that I ran into while doing the interview was when the minister would start preaching while he was being interviewed. I would ask him about a specific topic and he would talk about the topic for a minute or two, but then make his way into finding a religious connection to the topic or segway into another topic. I couldn't interrupt him, because I wanted to be professional. However, as an oral historian, my job is to try to get his version of

the story. Thus, the more I let him speak on how he viewed my question or the topic, the more of an authentic source he was, whether or not what he spoke on had specific relevance to me.

Note on the Recording

For recording, I used my Olympus Digital Voice Recorder on battery power. I did not use an additional microphone. I found that the recorder picked up voices well, but it also picked up a lot of the background noises from the school outside of Min. Muhammad's office. Because of the nature of the person I was interviewing and the organization's sense of security for Mr. Muhammad, I did not request to do the interview elsewhere. He mumbles once or twice on the recording, but most of what is said is heard clearly on the recording.

Editing the transcript

My editing decisions included:

- 1) Eliminating repeated words
- 2) Eliminating false starts
- 3) Placing information about visual aids in brackets (like when I would show him a newspaper clipping or picture)
- 4) Placing a time indicator at the top of each page and at the beginning and end of each recording session
- 5) Eliminating transition words such as 'and', 'so', 'you know' or 'you understand' unless I thought it was relevant to what was being communicated
- 6) Using quotation marks to indicate reported speech