

‘Complex Subjectivities’: Don Omaruddin Mattera’s Conversion to Islam, Beyond a Political Reading and a Biographical Essay

By Tahir Fuzile Sitoto
(School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics,
University of KwaZulu-Natal)

I think the time is ripe for an essay in appreciation of this ageless literary activist who makes music with his poetry. To hear his resonant voice speak his poetry is also to wish he would make tape recordings of his readings.¹

Abstract

Known invariably as the ‘Bard of liberation,’ or more lately as ‘the poet of compassion,’ it is rather odd that Don Mattera remains an enigma in South African scholarship. Without claiming to offer a comprehensive biographical account of Don Mattera, the specific aim of this essay is to make sense of Mattera’s conversion to Islam as well as his encounter with resurgent Muslim organizations. Foregrounding his autobiographical voice, sense of agency and self, the essay ventures to challenge a prevailing tendency in academic literature that often interprets Black and African conversion to Islam in strictly political terms. Hence while the essay acknowledges the dialectical tension between the political and spiritual in Mattera’s religious journey, it contends that

1 E’skia, Mphahlele, “Introduction,” in Don Mattera, *Azanian Love Song* (Grant Park: y Perspectives Publishing, 2007 [1983]), vii.

any reading or interpretation of Don Mattera's encounter with Islam that dismisses the spiritual dimension of his conversion would be grossly mistaken.

Introduction

Es'kia Mphahlele's thoughtful remarks, cited above, signal at once not only the need to take Don Mattera and his work more seriously, but also the imperative to devote more critical studies to him. Even though Mattera is one of South Africa's famous public poets, as well as a writer and activist, he is ironically the least studied in scholarship. There are only a few isolated essays and brief reviews on some of his work: these include Thomas Bruckner's "'The end of the Historical Player,' An interview with Don Mattera,"² Stephen Gray's "Raw Testimony of Sophiatown"³ or Bernard Magubane's introductory essay, in Mattera's *Memory is the Weapon*⁴. Apart from these, there is to date no substantive work on Mattera, let alone on his vision and ideas as an activist and a poet. The focus in this essay, however, is not to provide a comprehensive account of Mattera, the creative writer, poet or even the journalist. Instead, the aim here is to explore *how* one might find a critical, yet empathetic *reading* of Don Mattera with a view to paying particular attention to his journey to Islam as well as exploring whether his politics are in anyway related to his commitment to Islam. This investigation is critical if one considers that the little that is written about Don Mattera, is written only within the context of South African literary studies; that too, is confined to Black South African writing in English or more crudely what is generalized as "protest literature" and "poetry of Black Consciousness."⁵

Whereas most of the data for this essay is selected from what is

- 2 Thomas Bruckner, "'The End of the Historical Player': An Interview with Don Mattera," in Geoffrey V. Davis (ed.), *Voyages and Explorations: Southern African Writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 89.
- 3 Stephen Gray, "Raw Testimony of life in Sophiatown," *Die Suid Afrikaan*, June 1988, 44-45.
- 4 Bernard Magubane, "Introduction" in Don Mattera, *Memory is the Weapon* (Johannesburg: African Perspectives Publishing, 2009 [1987]), iii-xxiii.
- 5 See Bruckner, "'The End of the Historical Player': An Interview with Don Mattera," 1994, 89.

otherwise a work still in progress,⁶ the essay is nevertheless self-standing and consists of five sections. The first is the introduction where the context is mapped and the author's approach to Don Mattera is described. The second section provides Mattera's brief biographical sketch within South Africa's troubled past, and touches as it were, on his transition from a life of delinquency to what Thomas Bruckner has termed "the author of committed" and "empathetic poetry."⁷ The focus in the third section is on Mattera's activist role within the Pan-Africanist and Black Consciousness Movements and thus serves as a necessary background to the fourth section, where there is an analysis of the meaning of his subsequent acceptance of Islam and his encounter with Islamists and Islamist discourse in the country. The last section provides the conclusion and summary of the essay.

Note that the author has deliberately used the word "encounter" with Islamist discourse and Islamists to indicate that in as much as Don Mattera participates from time to time in Islamist-related activities, it would be misleading to describe him as an Islamist in the conventional sense. That is, if by Islamist and by inference Islamism we imply, following Abdulkader Tayob (1995) and Rosander (1997), a commitment to Islam 'as a political ideology' through which Muslim societies (and individuals) strive to be organized.⁸ Based on a critical reading of Mattera's narrative of his journey to Islam, his vision and sense of a Muslim self, the designation 'Islamist' with its overt political undertones is too restrictive to apply to the independent thinking Mattera. This is not to say he is not sympathetic towards Islamist political rhetoric. For example, Don

6 By 'work in progress' the writer of this essay is referring to his ongoing Doctoral study on Don Mattera with the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, provisionally titled: "I am *the* story of transcendence': A thesis on Africana-Islamica existential thought with a primary focus on the writings and thought of Don Omaruddin Mattera (1935-)."

7 Thomas Bruckner, "'The End of the Historical Player': An Interview with Don Mattera," 89.

8 See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995), 25-27; Eva Evers Rosander, "Introduction: The Islamisation of 'Tradition' and 'Modernity,'" in David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander (eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 6-7.

Mattera has spoken on a number of public platforms organized and hosted by Islamist or Islamist oriented organizations. However, it is argued in this essay that, notwithstanding his political commitments, it would be grossly inadequate to privilege only a political reading of Don Mattera's narrative, more especially on his conversion to Islam.

Mediating the "Problem of Biography" – A Trajectory Analysis

A biography maps the social architecture of an individual life. The biographer charts the evolution of a subject over time, and the various challenges and tests that the individual endures to provide insights into the person's character. But the biographer has an additional burden: to explain events and perspectives that the subject could not possibly know, that have a direct bearing on the individual's life.⁹

Although somewhat of a disclaimer, the subtitle of this essay, "beyond a political reading and biographical essay," alludes to the method and approach that informs the author's reading of Don Mattera here. In Lewis Gordon's Chapter "A Problem of Biography in Africana thought" from his *Existential Africana*, Gordon highlights some of the constraints associated with biography, especially when it concerns writing about Black lives: thus, it can be a liability if a biography is deployed as a strategic method to foreground the lives of significant figures, rather than to illuminate them. In other words, as Gordon argues, biography at times tends to foster a form of "epistemic closure," and by inference, a reductionist framing of Black subjects as if they were devoid of ideas and agency.¹⁰ The kind of criticism that was levelled at Xolela Mangcu's long awaited biography on Stephen Bantu Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness in South Africa, is a case in point.¹¹ For example, in his review of Mangcu's

9 Manning, Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 479.

10 Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22-40.

11 Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Biography* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012).

biography Andile Mngxitana maintained that the work has downplayed the role of Black Consciousness “as a revolutionary philosophy” and therefore “found wanting.”¹² Despite this kind of criticism, Mangcu’s critics miss the fact that the issue is not just that his biography on Biko is less textured and therefore disappointing. The problem lies squarely with biography as a genre. By its very nature, as Manning Marable alludes, if the task of a biography is to provide “the social architecture of an individual’s life,” then the biographer’s duty is to chart comprehensively “the evolution of a subject over time.”¹³ Ironically, it is this imperative to chart a comprehensive account of a subject’s life, that for Gordon, though useful, limits the capacity of biography as a genre to capture the thoughts and vision of a subject more fully.

In making these cursory remarks on the constraints imposed by biography, the aim is not to make a blanket condemnation of biography as a method; moreover, critics such as Gordon are not dismissing its significance completely.¹⁴ Michael Dyson, for example, strives to counter the perceived limits in Black biographies by employing what he terms “a trajectory analysis.” This, in Dyson’s sense, entails an analysis that not only circumvents the problem of trapping Black intellectual production through uncritical biographical narratives such as ‘iconizing’ the subject as a flawless hero, but also ensures an enabling reading of the biographical subject. In other words, a trajectory analysis fosters a kind of reading where ‘evolution of belief and thought,’ especially of ‘historical figures’ are accentuated; moreover, ‘previously held ideas’ are not treated in isolation but held in tension with emerging ones. The aim is to situate the subject and its “career in its [proper] cultural and historical contexts.”¹⁵ Accordingly, this essay applies an approach which, although partly descriptive, follows Dyson’s notion of a trajectory analysis, in aiming for

12 See Andile Mngxitana, “Biko’s Biography Found Wanting,” *Mail & Guardian*, October 5-11, 2012, 11.

13 Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 2012, 479.

14 Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana*, 2000, 26.

15 Michael Dyson, “X Marks the Plots: A Critical Reading of Malcolm X’s Readers,” in Michael E. Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 261-86.

a comprehensive reading of Don Mattera's activist life and religious turn. In focussing on Mattera this essay touches on his transition to Islam, in addition to Dyson's trajectory analysis; consequently, reference is made to a limited extent to William James' insights on the meaning of religious conversion, as well as to Anthony Pinn's reflection on conversion within the context of Black religious experience.¹⁶

Don Mattera (1935): A Brief Biographical Sketch¹⁷

Don Mattera belongs to a group of South African writers, poets and political activists who have witnessed the worst and the best in South Africa's history. Mattera was born in 1935 in what was then known as Western Native Township, a Black ghetto near the more cosmopolitan Sophiatown and adjacent to the city of Johannesburg. The Mattera family patriarch was an Italian immigrant married to a Xhosa woman from the land-locked town of Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape. It is out of this initial union that the Mattera South African clan has blossomed. Hence Don Mattera literally embodies a mixed family heritage. Besides the 'Italian' and 'Xhosa' lineage, his family heritage consists, also, of 'Tswana' and 'Khoi-Khoi' ancestors. Don Mattera celebrates this mixed ancestry line with great pride and in doing so is quite different from someone like Bessie Head, the famed Black South African novelist who also had

16 See William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Fontana Library, 1975 [1902]) and also, Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Although initially weary of the dominance of the narrative of conversion as the only mode of examining Black Muslim experiences, especially in South Africa, I am indebted to some of the discussions at the Biographies Conference for persuading me to reconsider my critical stance on conversion. See also, Cathlene Dollar's report on the conference, "Biographies of Religious Engagement: Islamic Activism in Psychological Perspective: A Centre for Contemporary Islam Conference, 10-12 October 2012," in *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 2012, 11, 97.

17 For this biographical sketch I am indebted to various sources too numerous to include here. These range from the various Don Mattera interviews that have appeared in written and recorded formats, resumés in different websites as well as some of Mattera's own writings such as his autobiography, *Memory is the Weapon*. See also, the short entry "Omaruddin Francisco Mattera" in the recently published compilation by Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: the anti-apartheid struggle* (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 2012), 211-215.

a mixed family lineage but constantly “felt alienated” and “restless” as Cecil Abrahams described her.¹⁸ Thus while laws of racial segregation under apartheid have classified South Africans of mixed parents as Coloured, Don Mattera has self-consciously refused to accept this label, insisting on referring to himself as Black and African.¹⁹ It is this Black and African consciousness that would later see him gravitate towards a Pan-Africanist political orientation and later embrace Black Consciousness and its philosophy.

Beyond Black Pathologies

As noted above, there are few writings available on Mattera's life. Part of the problem with these is that they often cast him through the ‘two contrasting’ narratives, that is: either as a former ‘gang-leader’ or as the radical poet. Inarguably, this dualistic portrayal of Mattera obscures his otherwise complex life. For example, his change from the life of delinquency happened as early as 1955, and is fairly well documented in his autobiography *Memory is the Weapon*; however Tom Lodge in an interview that took place decades later still entrapped Mattera in the narrative of gangsterism.²⁰ To be sure, Mattera does own up to the delinquent ways of his past even though one notices some discomfort with his constant portrayal as “a former gangster.”²¹ In most of his interviews, when asked about his involvement in gangsterism, his response is quite

18 Cecil Abrahams, “The Tragic Life of Bessie Head,” in Cecil Abrahams (ed.), *The Tragic life of Bessie Head: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 3-10.

19 A better appreciation of Don Mattera's position can be gained in the context of what Mohamed Adhikari has called “Colored rejectionism.” In particular Adhikari is referring to poets such as James Mathews, the ‘internationally renowned Coloured writer from the Cape Flats’ in Cape Town. In a way similar to Don Mattera, Mathews, at least in his poetry, openly rejects the notion of Coloured identity. See Mohamed Adhikari, “From Manenberg to Soweto: race and coloured identity in the black consciousness poetry of James Mathews,” in *African Studies*, 62, 2003, 171-186.

20 See Tom Lodge's recorded “Interview with Don Mattera,” *Wits Historical Papers*. No date.

21 Another example of the constant framing of Mattera as a ‘former gangster’ is reflected in this article: “From ‘gangster to humanist,’ Dr. Don Muhammad Omaruddin Mattera honored,” *Al-Qalam*, June 2013, 3.

telling. Thus, in an interview in *Timbila* (a poetry journal), after giving some background to the challenges his family was experiencing at the time, Mattera retorted as follows:

[...] When I came into the streets, my family was cracking up and breaking up. Then I became a street kid, a *tsotsi* – at least they say so. I defended a lot of kids. The more you defend, the more friends you have. In no time we became a little gang, *The Vultures*. From there we started fighting in the streets. And that is not gangsterism. It's called delinquency, but people give it a name because they like to describe people and put them in pockets.²²

As Mattera explains further, his emphasis is worth noting:

Everybody thinks gangsters fall from a hole in the sky that they come out of a little box. Nobody says that society creates the material conditions that gave birth to some of these people. And then there are criminals who are just criminals and you can't change them. But they are not only Black. They're White as well.²³

This essay has deliberately touched on the subject of Mattera's early life in delinquency to underpin the fact that the practice of confining Mattera's life within the context of his early involvement with gangsters, obscures subsequent shifts in his life. This essay is not intended to motivate for an erasure of his past involvement in gangsterism; instead, it calls simply for a balanced account where other aspects of his life receive more attention: these include his intellectual achievements and political activism, especially his role in the formative years of the Black Consciousness Movement in the country and subsequently his turn to Islam.

22 See Don Mattera, interview with Wisani Nghaluma, *Timbila: A Journal of Onion Skin Poetry*, 2002, 156.

23 Mattera interview with Nghaluma, 2002, 156.

Early Education, Traces of Religious and Political Consciousness

In 1942, Don Mattera was sent to study at the young age of six at the Saint Theresa Dominican Catholic Convent near the harbour city of Durban. He credits that Convent for instilling his love of books and learning. He notes in the interview with Bruckner: "One of the good things," is that the Convent had "an extensive library" where as a young boy he could bury himself in books.²⁴ But as he writes in his autobiography, there is also an indication that it was also at the Convent where his religious consciousness was first ignited. Thus: "Although we were never forced to become Catholics, prayer became a way of life so that we lived Catholic, laughed, played, slept and even ate Catholic [...] it was quite an experience for me to learn the ways of God."²⁵ Interestingly, besides initiation in Catholic ways, Mattera asserts that one of the habits he imbibed at the Convent was to read the entire King James version of the Bible, many times. And as he confesses, he read the Christian scripture not so much for the truth of its message but for the beauty of its language. This practice is not unique to Mattera; other African intellectuals would occasionally read the Bible as a literary and aesthetic text.²⁶

According to this early account of his formative years, Mattera became literate at a fairly young age and this applied also to his introduction to "the ways of God."²⁷ As for his political transformation, Magubane contends the "atmosphere of ANC-led resistance [mid-1950s] played a key role in Mattera's political development." It compelled him to "put down the knife and gun and take up the pen."²⁸ This political awareness

24 Don Mattera interview with Thomas Bruckner, 1994, 89. See also Yasmine Kathleen Killian, "Language, Identity and Alienation in the work of Don Mattera." B.A. (Honours) dissertation, VISTA University, Port Elizabeth, 1994, 11.

25 Don Mattera, *Memory is the Weapon*, 2009 [1987], 39.

26 See, for instance, Colin Bundy, *Govan Mbeki: A Jacana Pocket Biography* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012), 82; see also, Gerald West, "Thabo Mbeki's Bible: The Role of Religion in the South African Public Realm," in Duncan Brown (ed.), *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives* (Scottsville, UKZN Press, 2009), 78-106; and Duncan Brown, "Modern Prophets Produce a New Bible': Christianity, Africanness and the Poetry of Nontsizi Mqweto," *Current Writing*, 2, 2008, 77-91.

27 See Mattera, *Memory is the Weapon*, 39.

28 See Bernard Magubane, "Introduction," in Don Mattera's *Memory is the Weapon* (Grant Park: African Perspectives Publishing, 2009 [1987]), x.

is affirmed in graphic terms by Mattera himself when he speaks of this transformation as a “metamorphosis from a veritable violent beast to human being.” Thus, he confirms that it “began in 1955 when the first seeds of political awareness were sown.”²⁹

According to the above account, the anti-removals campaigns and ‘the demolition’ of Sophiatown, where Mattera’s rich Italian family lost almost everything, were the triggers that marked a turning point in his political awareness; this account, however, is not quite precise. A closer reading of Mattera’s life shows that his political consciousness started much earlier. His narrative in *Memory is the Weapon* refers, for instance, to the fact that while at the Convent, Mattera was opposed to what he considered “a process of depersonalization” by refusing to be baptized as a Catholic. One can argue that his refusal to be baptized reflects a deep-seated political attitude towards any form of indoctrination, albeit one premised at the time on politics of self-identity.³⁰ Another fact hardly mentioned in the limited writings on Mattera’s early life, is that while involved in gang related activities, he was simultaneously active in the student debating movement, the *Western Area Student Association* (WASA), which he joined formally in 1957.³¹ WASA is described by Vahed as “a conduit”³² of the ANC Youth League. One can deduce from Don Mattera’s involvement in WASA that in his world, the line between “gangsterism” and politics was rather blurred. That is why in some of his interviews he often invokes the notion of the ‘gangster politician,’ implying that Mattera saw himself as political. Thus he insists that even though he was not yet an official member of the ANC, ‘on many occasions’ he continued to protect people, especially the women members of the movement “as they marched through the streets of Sophiatown.”³³

29 Don Mattera, *Memory is the Weapon*, 127-128.

30 This is not to suggest that Mattera did not appreciate the time spent at the Convent; rather it is only to emphasize that his sense of self-awareness and consciousness about his identity can be depicted from a young age.

31 Mattera, *Memory is the Weapon*, 133.

32 Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: the anti-apartheid struggle*, 2012, 211.

33 Mattera’s refusal openly to join the ANC should be understood in the context of the transition that he was undergoing in his life at the time. That transition was from gang related activities to a reawakened interest in the politics of the Congress Movement. See Mattera, *Memory is the Weapon*, 127.

Undoubtedly, there could be other personal matters that influenced Mattera's shift towards politics and finally, his abandonment of the delinquent life. The birth of his first child is often quoted as one such instance. Also, Mattera hints in his autobiography that his survival against the bullets from rival gangs was a wake-up call suggesting that there was more to life than gang fights. While the reasons for his final shift to becoming a political activist are debatable, it is indisputable that, given the political mood of the 1950s with the politics of resistance against Apartheid gaining momentum, the ANC was Mattera's first political home. However, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) later formed as a break-away movement from the ANC and at this point, Mattera gravitated to the latter and subsequently in the 1970s, openly aligned himself with the Black Consciousness Movement.

Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and the Encounter with Islam: Mattera's Political Activism in Perspective

Don Mattera took a large share in the conscientization then taking place under the auspices of the Black Consciousness organizations.³⁴

If one excludes Mattera's writings, his active role within the Pan-Africanist Congress is difficult to pin down. Part of the difficulty, as he indicates in some of his interviews, is the fact that he was not a formal member of the PAC but only "an underground operative" of its military wing, the "Azanian People's Liberation Army."³⁵ It is clearer, though, that he played a more visible role within the Black Consciousness Movement, as confirmed by Alvarez-Pereyre's statement. Of course, one of the reasons that figures like Mattera are not given sufficient recognition in writings on Black Consciousness, is that most of the time the focus is on the looming figure of Steve Biko with less focus on other leaders and activists of the Movement.

34 Jacques, Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 194.

35 Don Mattera interviewed by Madi Gray <http://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/matteraaccessed> February, 2009. See also, Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: the anti-apartheid struggle*, 2012, 212.

Without underplaying Biko's foundational and leadership role in the Black Consciousness Movement, its popularization was also facilitated to a great extent by cultural and literary activists such as Don Mattera who used not only their poetry but also other 'cultural weapons' to advance the struggle against Apartheid.³⁶ These cultural weapons ranged from journalism in formations such as the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ) orchestrated by Mattera as its founding figure in 1986, to other forms of resistance against Apartheid such as theatre and music.³⁷ Thus in addition to writing poetry, an autobiography and short stories, Mattera has also produced four plays: these are *Apartheid in the Court of History*; *Street Kids*; *Kagiso Sechaba* and *One Time Brother*. The latter play was banned for its overt political content that ridiculed the "imposition of the tricameral elections" or "parliament:"³⁸ a system that sought to co-opt other racial groups to give legitimacy to Apartheid rule at the exclusion of the African majority. Given Mattera's heightened political activities, it was only a matter of time before he would end up as a banned person for almost a decade from 1973 to 1983. This penalty was often imposed to censor political opponents of the Apartheid government. As a writer, this meant Don Mattera could not publish any new work in South Africa or address any public gathering.

After this account of Don Mattera's involvement in the politics of liberation and especially his role in the Black Consciousness Movement, we can now move to some reflections on his encounter with Islam and later, on his engagement with Islamists.³⁹

36 As Mattera's interview with Thomas Bruckner indicates, his first anthology of poetry *Azanian Love Song* was often referred to as the "Bible of the Black Consciousness Movement." See Don Mattera interviewed by Thomas Bruckner, 1994, 97. This view finds support also in Ursula Barnett's *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914-1980)* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 70.

37 See for example Magubane, "Introduction," in Don Mattera's *Memory is the Weapon* (Grant Park: African Perspectives Publishing, 2009 [1987]), x.

38 Don Mattera interviewed by Bruckner, 1994, 93.

39 To refer to South Africa is not to paint a parochial picture that limits Mattera to South African concerns only. The Palestinian issue among others is one of the concerns that Mattera is passionate about; to this effect he has written what he refers to as the "Palestinian poems." See, for instance, his "Song for Palestine" in Don Mattera, *They Passed this Way and Touched our Lives* (Florida: African Morning Star Publications, 2008), 77.

Don Mattera and Islam: “A *Hijra* (or flight away) from Christianity”?

Conversion to Islam in South Africa is a complex matter and the complexity can be attributed to many factors. For example it is complex in the sense that to many Black South Africans, Islam is perceived as a foreign religion and hence alien to Black culture and sensibilities. However, it is the intention of this essay to delve extensively into the phenomenon of conversion, more especially among Blacks in South Africa. It is not the aim to probe the history of Islam and its perception, mainly among Black South Africans who due to the dominance of Christianity in the country, often regard Islam as alien to Africans.⁴⁰ However, Don Mattera and a few other Black activists did not have this perception. Since the mid-1970s noticeable numbers of Black Africans who were mostly from Christian backgrounds, have begun to move towards Islam. They have since represented what Abdulkader Tayob has termed elsewhere “communities under the shadows” within South African Islam.⁴¹ To explain this turn towards Islam, a number of perspectives are often put forward.

Muhammed Haron, for instance, in one of the early studies on African conversion in Black townships, has shown how Islam was gaining momentum among a small coterie of Black followers in the Western Cape. The reason advanced by Haron for the acceptance of Islam was its perceived affinity with African culture.⁴² More recently, Sindre

40 Although still not adequate, there are a number of publications covering different aspects of Muslim history in the country. See, for example, Shamil Jeppie and Goolam Vahed, “Multiple Communities: Muslims in post-Apartheid South Africa,” in John Daniel, Roger Southall and Jessica Lutchman (eds.), *State of the Nation: South Africa: 2004-2005* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2006), 252-86; Ebrahim Moosa, “Islam in South Africa,” in Martin Prozesky and John W. de Gruchy (eds.), *Living Faiths* (Cape Town: David Phillips, 1995), 129-54; Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam, Sermons and Mosques* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2009).

41 See Abdulkader Tayob, “Communities under the Shadows,” *Al-Qalam*, June 1995.

42 See Muhammed Haron, “Dawah amongst Africans in the Greater Cape Town,” *Al-'Ilm (Journal of the Centre for Research in Islamic Studies)*, 12, 1992, 1-16. My remarks about Black Muslim conversion here are deliberately brief since the focus is not on that theme, but on Don Mattera. And of course, conversion to Islam is not an exclusively Black affair either. Conversion to Islam in South Africa is sometimes explored through the theme of inter-racial marriages. See, for instance, Cherry Leigh (Shenaaz) Muslim, “Women who convert to Islam: Compulsion or Free will.” Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2008.

Bangstad has identified the political variable as the more dominant pull among 'political and social activists' thus facilitating 'their route' to Islam.⁴³ The latter view finds further support in a number of other writings. For instance, Tayob, in his study of resurgent Islam in South Africa, has noted how resurgent Muslim organizations have in different disguises presented 'conversion' to Islam 'as a political solution to the country's problems.'⁴⁴ Commenting on this, Ebrahim Moosa has offered the following explanation: "during the oppressive years of apartheid it was *jihad*, understood as 'struggle' against an oppressive regime, which made Islam attractive to many black people in South Africa."⁴⁵

Of course, not every critical observer has agreed with some of the political claims made by resurgent Muslim organizations and those endorsing such claims. Shamil Jeppie in particular has thrown cold water on claims made by resurgent Muslim organizations, arguing that it was a case of conservative politics masquerading as radical politics for change and that, at best, these Islamist organizations were simply punching above their weight.⁴⁶ Without dismissing Jeppie's view, there can be no dismissing the fact that in the eyes of would-be Black converts apolitically active form of Islam was indeed attractive when contrasted against a tarnished image of Christianity.⁴⁷ Mattera's conversion to Islam took place in the 1970s, which was also the time of heavy resistance to Apartheid. To make sense of that conversion we pose the intriguing question: what

43 See Sindre Bangstad's "Black African Conversion to Islam in Cape Town," *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa*, 9, 2006-7, 14-17.

44 Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence: The Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995), 122-123; see also his *Islam, Sermons and Mosques* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1999), 78.

45 See Ebrahim Moosa, "Islam in South Africa," in Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy, *Living Faiths* (Cape Town: David Philips, 1995), 152.

46 Shamil Jeppie, "Amandla and Allahu Akbar: Muslims and Resistance in South Africa c.1970-1987," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 4, 1991, 3-19.

47 By a tarnished image of Christianity I refer to how the Bible was often used to justify the apartheid order through what Biblical scholars such as Gerald West have termed a "State theology," hence prompting alternative Black and Liberation theologies that would place the Bible in "the service of the oppressed." See for instance, Gerald West, "Thabo Mbeki's Bible: The Role of Religion in the South African Public Realm after Liberation," in Duncan Brown (ed.), *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives* (Scottsville: UKZN PRESS, 2009), 78-83.

happens when the convert (or converts) shows a disinclination or distaste towards the overt political rhetoric of resurgent Islam? Here, let us take the example of Don Mattera who, as this essay asserts, had already found an empowering political ideology in the movements for political change in South Africa (ANC, PAC or later in the BCM): on what grounds can we assume that would he find the discourse of political Islam attractive and hence politics was his main attraction to Islam? Is it possible to read the journey to Islam of Mattera (and others like him) differently? That is, by de-emphasizing for a while the political variable although acknowledging its significance?

In common with so many other aspects of his diverse career there is to date no extensive account of Mattera's conversion to Islam, although there are scanty remarks noting his 'adopted faith.' Therefore, as a background to a reflection on Don Mattera's encounter with Islamists and Islamist discourse, the writer explores first Mattera's own account of his transition to Islam which is analysed later. In a conversation, Don Mattera interestingly explained his 'journey' to Islam as "a *hijra*" in these words: "accepting Islam was a *hijra* from Christianity," and then burst into a soft laughter.⁴⁸ This description of Mattera's acceptance of Islam was particularly revealing because the word he chose to explain his turn to Islam is layered with multiple meanings. Among other meanings *hijra* connotes a flight from an insecure place, such as the historical migration of the early Muslims from Mecca to Medina. But *hijra* is also metaphorically, as highlighted by Ebrahim Moosa, a physical and spiritual 'exile.'⁴⁹

Although Mattera's autobiography does not touch on his Muslim phase, there are numerous clues there, as well as in some of his other statements, that may help to explain Mattera's account of his contact with Islam. One must recall, as noted in the discussion on his early life, that the young Mattera speaks of being apprehensive of what he considered the

48 Conversation with Don Mattera in Durban, August 8, 2011.

49 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1997), 118-122; Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazzali and the Poetics of Imagination*, (Chapelhill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 119-38. See also Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 232-43.

“depersonalization” and hence “indoctrination” that were taking place at the Catholic Convent. It seems that the question of identity is something Mattera has grappled with throughout most his life. This reference to identity is deliberately in the context of the self and the personal. Of course, this is not to deny the significance of the social and political dimensions of identity or identities. However, it is in the context of the self and the quest for personal identity, that one might arguably find a far richer interpretation of Don Mattera's gravitation to Islam. This assertion is based on Mattera's own discourse and accounts of his conversion in what is framed below as his conversation with Islamists.

Questioning the Rhetoric of Political Islam: Mattera's Conversation with Islamists

In order to gain a full appreciation of Mattera's statement on his acceptance of Islam as a flight or *hijra* away from Christianity, it is critical to note that when he decided to be associated with any formal religious group, his route was via the *Tabligh Jamaat*. What sets the *Tabligh Jamaat* apart among Muslim movements is not only its 'transnational' and 'missionary' activities, mainly targeting Muslims; it is also its single commitment to the revival of Muslim personal piety.⁵⁰ Mattera credits this movement for his sense of being a Muslim.

In February 2002, Don Mattera spoke at a predominantly Muslim gathering in Durban organized by the Islamic Propagation Centre International (or IPCI) on the theme of “The African Renaissance and 1400 Years of Islam in Africa.”⁵¹ He concluded what was otherwise a measured and nuanced address with a personal note. Prior to the concluding parts of his speech, he had touched on a range of themes that included colonialism, history, politics, cultural imperialism, role of organized religion and Islamic links with Africa. Yet the moment he touched on

50 See Marloes Janson, “Renegotiating Gender: Changing Moral Practice in the Gambia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 28, 2008, 9-36. For additional comments on the *Tabligh Jama'at*, see also Ebrahim Moosa, “Inside a Madressah: A Personal Narrative,” *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa*, 9, 2006-7, 39.

51 See “The African Renaissance & 1400 Years of Islam in Africa,” [IPCI DVD] Durban, ICC, February 2002.

the personal and made reference to his early moment with Islam, there was a noticeable change in the tone of his voice. Prefacing his remarks by exhorting his audience on the significance of *da'wa* or, in the popular sense, Muslim proselytization, Mattera remarked: one of the “greatest edifices of growth and transformation is through *da'wa*”. Without *da'wa*, he stressed, people such as himself, Muhammad Ali (the former world Heavyweight boxing champion) and advocate Dawood Ngwane (South African Catholic elder turned Muslim),⁵² who was sharing the podium with him at the time, would not have accepted Islam. As if possessed, Mattera continued: “had the *Tablighis* not come to Johannesburg in 1976, this man would not have taken the *kalima!* (official acceptance of Muslim faith) [...]”⁵³ This retelling of his encounter with Islam was reaffirmed again in one of Mattera's recent public outings in May 2013. This occasion was described as an event “to honour his contribution to social justice, peace and reconciliation in South Africa and the world.” The occasion was jointly hosted by AWQAF SA, a recently formed entity to promote the Islamic principles of endowment (and other charitable acts) and the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa. The latter is one of the few Islamist groups in the country that has kept in close contact with Mattera.⁵⁴ During this event, Mattera reiterated the narrative of his conversion and punctuated his address by insisting that, even though he has received so many accolades in his life, he considers his guidance to Islam or “*hidaya*” (guidance) as the greatest accolade of all; for “Allah had a better plan.”⁵⁵ What emerged from Mattera's brief allusion to his acceptance of Islam was that he was won over to Islam by various factors, read closely together. These factors included not only the formal testimony of faith as captured in the Islamic declaration of God's Oneness and Muhammad's apostleship through the “*kalima*”, the declaration of

52 For more details on Ngwane, see “Chapter 24: Other Persuasions,” in Goolam Vahed's *Ahmed Deedat: The Man and his Mission* (Durban: IPCI, 2013), 247-252.

53 Don Mattera, “Islam and the African Renaissance,” Speech, IPCI DVD, 2004.

54 “From ‘gangster to humanist,’ Dr. Don Muhammad Omaruddin honoured,” *Al-Qalam*, June 2013, 3. For a detailed study of this group see Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 1995.

55 From personal notes taken at this event. See also *Al-Qalam*, June 2013, 3.

faith, but also Islam's articulation of the theme of 'compassion.' In other words, the transformative power of the idea of God's *Oneness* as well as infinite *compassion* are more compelling for him. This finding emerges more forcefully in the longer version of his African renaissance and Islam speech, when he notes for instance,

I believe that Muslims have not fully understood the power of what they possess. We can transform this country, this continent – we can transform the world. But we first need to transform from inside. The first thing that attracted me to Islam was: “Read in the name the Lord the Merciful, the Compassionate.” For thy Lord is Compassion [...].⁵⁶

It is crucial to observe at this point that although Mattera is known for his political activism, and is therefore alert to social imperatives for societal transformation, his notion of transformation is not limited to political and social demands alone. Also, it is expressed through an emphasis on the spiritual and searching of the 'self'. Hence, “to transform,” he insists, “we first need to transform from inside.” Put differently, the basis for any transformation, social or otherwise, is first the transformation of the self.⁵⁷ But why does Mattera accent self and personal transformation? Could such an emphasis be largely due to his early association with the *Tabligh Jamaat* and its discipline of personal piety and notions of Islamic spirituality?⁵⁸

56 Don Mattera, in “The African Renaissance & 1400 Years of Islam in Africa,” Durban, 2002.

57 For a full discussion on the social and political dimensions of the self, see for example, Okot p'Bitek, “The Sociality of the Self,” in Emanuel Eze (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 73-74.

58 The writer of this essay accepts that a possible limitation in this essay is that although reference is made to terms and concepts such as *political*, *spiritual/spirituality* as well as *transcendent* and *transcendence*, the writer has not ventured to offer any detailed explanation of these. This omission is partly because of the essay's limited scope; as noted previously the essay draws from research that is part of a comprehensive study on Don Mattera, and it is there where the writer elaborates upon these terms and concepts in more detail than the minimalist sense in which they are used here.

Without slipping into a reductionist reading of Mattera's discourse, this account of his attraction to Islam questions the privileged narrative stating that political Islam is attractive to politically conscious subjects. On the contrary, a critical reflection on Mattera's narrative locates his turn towards Islam within a context of what might be considered a deeper spiritual quest for existential meaning and transformation of the self. This should not be taken to suggest in any way that Mattera's early contact with the *Tabligh* movement has translated into a slavish following of Tabligh's overtly pietistic and apolitical version of Islam. On entering Islam, Mattera has continued to interact with a number of other Muslim formations that comfortably fit the label of Islamist (read: politically conscious) organizations. The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and the IPCI referred to earlier are examples.⁵⁹ It is significant to observe that although Mattera enjoys links with these Islamist-oriented organizations, he has always refrained from endorsing any particular Muslim organizational line or ideology. It is not the various ideologies and their contending politics within Islam that have endeared him to Islam, but its notion of compassion and quest for self-transformation. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that in Mattera's encounters with Islamist activists so accustomed to a political narrative and reading of Islam, some of those activists then become disappointed when he recounts his attraction to Islam in spiritual terms. For example, writing for the Durban published Muslim paper *Al-Qalam*, Na'eem Jeenah, a critical stakeholder in the South African circles of political Islam, describes his first meeting with Mattera as 'a letdown.' This meeting was at a gathering of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1980s where Mattera was billed as a speaker. Jeenah recalls this event in the following fashion:

[As] A teenager thinking he was engaged in struggle, I couldn't wait to meet him. But it was a letdown. Instead of

59 Here the writer is referring both to the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) as well as to the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI) as Islamists in the sense that Tayob has described these organizations as critical players in the promotion of "Islamic resurgence" and "resurgent ideas" in South Africa. See Abdulkader Tayob's *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1995), 98.

talking about important things like the meaning of being Black or the implications of being a Muslim and in the BC movement, he talked to us [...] about compassion. Long story about how he became a Muslim, attracted not by Islam's stand on justice and fighting against the oppression (as I had thought) but by the *basmallah*, the fact that the statement that Muslims repeat before doing anything is about the Compassion of Allah [...].⁶⁰

Clearly not impressed with Mattera's 'compassion talk,' the disappointment in Jeenah's tone is evident as he notes: "Strange I thought. This was [...] the heady days of struggle, of revolution, of fighting against the oppressor pharaohs of apartheid. And here was the tower of the struggle going all soft. Sad, really."⁶¹

To cite Jeenah here is not to provide a caricature of his views, but is intended to demonstrate the tenacity of the political in the imagination of most Islamist-minded activists like him.⁶² For as he indicates, in coming to listen to Mattera for the first time, his expectation was that Mattera's speech would be spiced with political platitudes as a rationale for why he had embraced Islam. Yet, Mattera's simple answer was: the *basmallah*. It was not, as Jeenah concedes, the rhetoric of justice, but instead, the Islamic idiom of compassion that fascinated Mattera. This is not to say that on becoming a Muslim, Mattera has abandoned political activism for a narrow personal piety. Rather, the point is that Mattera's political commitments do not require a religious or Islamic framework

60 See Na'eem Jeenah, "Struggling, and Finding Compassion," *Al-Qalam*, September, 2004 (Also quoted in Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: the anti-apartheid struggle*, 2012, 214).

61 Jeenah accepts, however, in the same article where he refers to Mattera, that even though he was unimpressed with Mattera at first, with age he has learnt to appreciate Mattera's enchantment with the notion of compassion. Na'eem Jeenah, *Al-Qalam*, September, 2004.

62 The framing of Jeenah here as an Islamist is not arbitrary; rather it is informed by the leadership role he has played as a critical voice within the Muslim Youth Movement and before that, with the Muslim Student Association of South Africa. For more information on Jeenah, see also Vahed's "Na'eem Jeenah," in *Muslim Portraits*, 2012, 187-188.

to find expression since these are an individual commitment. Indeed, with time, Mattera has demonstrated a critical stance on institutional religion. This stance is summed up acutely by Goolam Vahed in his brief portrait of Don Mattera compiled as part of a catalogue of political activists dubbed as “Muslim portraits” in the “anti-apartheid struggle:” here he observes that Mattera’s “actions are motivated by compassion.” The writer agrees fully with this observation: a critical reflection on Don Mattera’s public discourse shows how often it is interspersed with constant refrains such as “no religion is greater than compassion.” Or, as in his other expressions such as the one reflected in the portrait by Vahed, “Compassion is my religion,” for “God is the dispenser of the first compassion.”⁶³ Undoubtedly Mattera’s approach to religion and his enchantment with the idea of compassion warrants further attention than can be provided in this limited essay.⁶⁴ Still, this does not preclude an attempt to analyse Don Mattera’s account of his conversion beyond the mostly descriptive account offered thus far.

A Transcendental Self and a “Complex Subjectivity?”: An Analysis

One can argue that in order to appreciate Don Mattera’s discourse on religion and his account of his conversion to Islam, one must go beyond a language that separates the spiritual from the political as antimonies. This requires revisiting the Black Consciousness philosophy. The Black Consciousness of which Mattera was one of the prominent advocates was not only a social and political philosophy; it also promoted in the words of Percy Mabogo More “a struggle for a new consciousness.” That is, “a reawakening of a self-consciousness from the clutches of [a] dominating” environment.⁶⁵ This explains the resolve of exponents of Black Consciousness to break free from any ‘clutches’ that denied one’s

63 Don Mattera quoted in *Al-Qalam*, June 2013, 3. See also, Don Mattera quoted in Vahed’s *Muslim Portraits*, 2012, 214.

64 At this stage my remarks here are only perfunctory; Mattera’s enchantment with the idea of ‘compassion’ is one of the themes I interrogate in my Doctoral project.

65 See Mabogo P. More, “Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher,” *Alternation*, 11, 2004, 86.

freedom to be a full person. Accordingly, the self as informed by Black Consciousness philosophy is not “the post-modern fragmented” self and “subject.”⁶⁶ On the contrary, the sense of self and subject as understood in the language of Black Consciousness, and as articulated by Black Consciousness advocates such as Don Mattera implies “holistic beings.”⁶⁷ That means also, where for the religious subject, matters pertaining to transcendence are not discarded but remain critical to one's sense of being and subjectivity. It is in this holistic sense that Black Consciousness as a new radical consciousness prompted as it were, ruptures of thought that impacted not only on political issues, but also on religious and spiritual matters. One way in which this consciousness in particular is discernible, is precisely through religious conversion as embodied in figures such as Don Mattera.

Of course, most advocates of Black Consciousness would say that Black theology and liberation theologies in South Africa as argued by Itumeleng Mosala and others, also represent examples of this transformation of consciousness.⁶⁸ From the perspective of someone like Don Mattera and other Black converts to Islam, the problem with the latter view is that it was still premised on intra conversions within Christianity. On the other hand, for those activists who turned to Islam, conversion was in a sense an embrace of a new consciousness, and a transcendental one. The use of the term “transcendental consciousness” rearticulates Don Mattera's own statement that his life and his story are but “*the* story of transcendence.”⁶⁹ Hence, this essay argues that his conversion to Islam cannot be treated as an insignificant episode and should not be read through conventional, political lenses; instead, it constitutes a significant milestone in his life.

Here, Anthony Pinn's reflections on conversion among Black

66 See Nik Farrel Fox, *The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 31.

67 See Don Mattera in interview with Thomas Buckner, 1994.

68 See Itumeleng, J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 1-2.

69 See Don Mattera's acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of an honorary Doctorate, WITS, April 2009, University of Witwatersrand. For now, these remarks are rather cursory; this idea is also explored at length in the writer's Doctoral project.

Americans can be useful. In *Terror and Triumph*, Pinn's overall concern is to provide "a theory of Black Religion," but his discussion of conversion among Black Americans, where he creatively reformulates William James' notion of conversion, also captures the idea of conversion as something that embodies a new consciousness. For instance, Pinn argues that among other factors that have facilitated conversion among Black or African-Americans, is what he terms "a triadic structure." This triad, according to Pinn, consists first of what he terms a "confrontation with historical identity;" in other words, this is the "who" of "what we are" through historical formation. Second, it is based on "wrestling with the old consciousness with the possibility of regeneration," while the third aspect of the triad is an "embrace of new consciousness."⁷⁰

Pinn's reformulation of James' model of conversion gives relatively little attention to the spiritual dimension and instead, it accentuates mainly the political and social dimensions that impact on conversion. Nevertheless, Pinn's insights do help to interpret Don Mattera's conversion, which clearly reflects what Pinn terms a "complex subjectivity." By this, Pinn refers to a view of subjectivity that, among other things, implies "the creative struggle in history for increased agency *as well as* for a fullness of life" (emphasis added).⁷¹ Extended to the example of Don Mattera, this view of a complex subjectivity – I maintain – rests at how though political, the political self does not necessarily discard or negate the spiritual self and, by inference, a consciousness of the transcendent as I have indicated. Rather, these modes of being intersect and are deeply embedded in Don Mattera's sense of self, in his consciousness and subjectivity.

Summary and Conclusion

Through locating the social, political and religious worlds that have shaped Don Mattera, this essay has first mapped a trajectory of the various transformations that have occurred in his life. To make sense not only of his transition to Islam, but also of his encounters and dialogue with Islamists in the country, the essay has then used Mattera's moment of conversion

70 Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 2003, 159.

71 Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 2003, 173.

to Islam as a point of critical reflection. By doing so, the essay has sought to situate his conversion through an interpretive strategy that positions Mattera not as a passive subject, but as an active one. Hence, where possible, the essay has accentuated Mattera's autobiographical voice and sense of agency. Notwithstanding his immersion in politics, it is argued that Mattera displays a sensibility that is profoundly conscious of the transcendent. In fact, it is this transcendental sensibility, consciousness and critical self-awareness or, to use Mattera's own words, the need to "transform from the inside," that facilitates his transition to Islam in the first instance. The writer of this essay acknowledges the dialectical tension between the political and spiritual in Mattera's religious journey and sense of self, but contends that any reading or interpretation that dismisses the spiritual dimension in his life as insignificant would remain amiss.⁷² To conclude, Don Mattera is invited to have the last words, through the medium of one of his poems simply titled "Sometimes:"

We need the spiritual retreat
to quell the seas of discontent
that rumble beneath our feet [...]⁷³

72 I concede that a full examination of Don Mattera's spiritual inclinations might also require an exploration of his take or association with Sufi Islam. To do so here, however, is beyond the limited scope of the current essay.

73 See Don Mattera, "Sometimes," in *Azanian Love Song* (Grant Park: African Perspectives Publishing, 2007 [1983]), 98.