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# The rise of a Muslim middle class in Britain: ethnicity, music and the performance of Muslimness

## Abstract

This paper uses original fieldwork data to examine the role of class and ethnicity in shaping performed identities for Muslim musicians. It claims that the emergence of a Muslim public sphere in Britain – which includes music as one important cultural component – is implicated by dominant notions of Muslimness that are developed in a field of power relations structured by class and ethnicity. The central claim of this paper is that an assertion of middle-class values and tastes can inform notions of Muslimness and that these are interwoven with the differential experiences of diverse Muslim ethnic groups in Britain. As evidence for this, the paper examines the ways in which this relationship between class and ethnicity is manifested in the Muslim public sphere through the performed identities of Muslim musicians. This includes a consideration of the influence of a broadly defined Middle Eastern/middle-class consumer culture on an 'Islamic pop' music scene in Britain, as well as the strategic responses – including acquiescence, navigation and resistance – from South Asian and Black Muslim musicians to the dominance of this cultural context. Overall, the paper concludes that the intersectional nature of Muslimness, with particular reference to class and ethnicity, must be examined further to fully understand the developing dynamics of an emergent Muslim public sphere in Britain.

## Keywords

Muslims, Islam, Britain, music, class, ethnicity, performance, Muslimness

## Introduction

A 2015 report profiling Muslims in Britain, based on the UK 2011 census, provides a complex snapshot of a population that is young, ethnically diverse and increasingly settled as the historic challenges of migrancy are somewhat overcome (Ali et al., 2015). While the report rightly focuses on the general deprivation of Muslims in Britain – including around key indicators such as high unemployment, poor health and residential overcrowding – it also refers to 'pockets of prosperity' and tangentially raises the prospect of generational change brought about by increasingly educated and socially capitalised young Muslims. This profile, while indicating areas of promising social development, is further complicated when issues around intersectionality are considered – including, most notably, the issue of ethnic and religious penalties across the labour market (Heath and Martin, 2012; Tariq and Syed, 2017). Crucially, these experiences are uneven, with different Muslim ethnic groups faring better or worse than others. This raises the prospect of a complicated disjuncture between a patchwork of growing Muslim aspiration and self-realisation on the one hand, and the continuing challenge of discrimination and deprivation on the other. In essence, as degree-educated and professional young Muslims continue to face subtle social barriers, partly erected in response to visible Muslim identities but also shaped by specific ethnic experiences, it is necessary to start considering the implications of a *frustrated Muslim middle class*. Where will the talents and energies of this emergent generation be directed? And how will it shape Muslim identity and consciousness in Britain?

Alongside this evolving demographic picture there has been a simultaneous growth in vibrant forms of Muslim cultural and civic activity in Britain. This has included the expansion of professionalised Islamic charities (Barylo, 2017), Muslim media and content providers (e.g. Islamic television channels, magazines, etc.), Islamic pedagogical and research institutes, Muslim lobbying and think-tank organisations, and business brands that cater for Muslim lifestyle choices around areas ranging from food and fashion to music and comedy (e.g. see Janmohamed, 2016; Lewis, 2015). These interconnected activities are, I argue, the constituent parts of a Muslim public sphere in Britain: they represent the consolidation of economic, social and cultural capital around interconnected forms of public Muslim practice, identity and expression. This public sphere can, of course, be understood in ways that draw on classical Habermasian theory (see Habermas, 1989): that is, as a discursive space, mediated by communication technologies and mass media, that enables the debate and formation of ideas relevant to a specific public (in this instance, a Muslim public in Britain). Yet, à la Benedict Anderson (1983), it is helpful to understand that a public sphere is more than just a realm of a debate for a pre-existing group, but that it can in itself generate forms of identity, group consciousness and imagination. It is formative as well as mediative.

Three assumptions relating to the idea of a Muslim public sphere underpin the concerns of this paper. First, it represents a natural arena for the talents and tastes of an emergent Muslim professional and middle class. Second, this public sphere has the potential to decisively influence the formation of Muslim cultural, social and religious identities in Britain. Third, with reference to Nancy Fraser (1990), the Muslim public sphere in Britain (just like Habermas' liberal bourgeois public sphere) is neither homogenous nor resistant to internal or external counterpublics – it sits within overlapping fields of public debate, including the British cultural mainstream, the wider Muslim world and the varied internal diversity of the Muslim community in Britain itself. By linking these three assumptions together, then, there is a clear need to better understand the role of class discourses and tastes in shaping the Muslim public sphere in Britain, as well the role of possible counterpublics in shaping and possibly resisting these dynamics.

To do this, in this paper, I examine one strand of this Muslim public sphere – music and performance. Music is an appropriate lens to examine wider issues because it cuts across a range of cultural and religious contexts – from the devotional to the superficial – and public performances are a space where social realities are articulated, encoded and embodied (Stokes, 1994). Through the study of music and performance it is possible to consider the entwining of class, ethnicity and religion for Muslims in Britain. More specifically, I argue that notions of 'correct' or normative Muslim experience and identity – the idea of 'Muslimness' (Moosavi, 2012) – are situationally performed within a field of power relations underpinned by ethnic and class dynamics. The performance and production of Muslimness is therefore bound together with the wider demographic picture outlined in the opening paragraph. In other words, the ongoing struggle to define Muslimness is shaped by the

emergence of a Muslim middle class and a complicated range of intersecting, differential, ethnic experiences.

The data used in this paper are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a number of years since 2010, which includes semi-structured interviews with 22 Muslim musicians and less formal conversations with other individuals working in a broadly defined 'Muslim culture industry' (including music, writing, television, film and comedy). By mutual agreement, the names of musicians have not been anonymised.

I begin the paper by developing the concept of performed Muslimness. Subsequent sections then progress to examine the ways in which ethnicity and class can inform the performance of Muslimness. Three principal areas are explored in each of these sections. First, the idea of a 'Muslim music' scene is introduced with the suggestion that this arena of cultural activity is dominated by a form of 'Islamic pop' drawing on Middle Eastern consumerism and middle-class ideologies – this is clearly to the benefit of musicians who are aligned with these ethnic and class biases. Second, it is proposed that South Asian Muslim musicians have a complicated relationship with South Asian diasporic culture that involves both rejecting and embracing certain aspects of it – these decisions are informed by class expectations and strategic positioning within a wider Muslim public sphere (Werbner, 2002). Third, the experiences of Black Muslim musicians are examined, with an emphasis on their claim that the Muslim public sphere in Britain can exclude Black Muslims. I argue that Black Muslim musicians re-appropriate and redefine notions of British Muslimness in order to ensure that it is inclusive of a more diverse range of (Black) Muslim experiences.

### **Muslimness, performance and music**

Muslim identity has been a focus of public and academic concern in the UK for several decades. While sensationalised public debates have tended to dwell on the relationship (or supposed conflict) between publicly acute religious and national identities, more detailed empirical studies have instead examined the complex interplay between underlying religious, ethnic, national, sectarian, local/translocal and class experiences (e.g. DeHanas, 2016; Hamid, 2016; Inge, 2016). A common theme that runs through these approaches is the notion of internally and externally manifested identities: the idea that there is an exterior sociability or public element to identity, but that there are also deeper (often concealed) social forces at work. To prioritise either of these elements at the expense of the other would be a mistake. The critical point of analysis is often the relationship between publicly realised identities on the one hand, and internal dispositions or underlying social forces on the other. Muslim identity is no different and, as I argue in this article, the point of contact between performed or mutually constructed Muslim public identities and wider social forces is of particular interest in relation to class and ethnicity. Analysing the nature of these relationships and processes – of the way in which underlying social identities influence and are influenced by publicly performed identities – is important in order to better understand the different ways of *being* Muslim in contemporary Britain.

Moosavi addresses some of these themes with the development of ideas relating to Muslimness. Drawing directly from Bourdieu, Moosavi argues that Muslimness is characterised by a set of embodied tendencies – an ‘Islamic habitus’ that is mutually constructed through Muslim socialisation – and that these dispositions are both performed and internalised:

Muslimness can be thought of as a religious-based habitus, an ‘Islamic habitus’, rather than a class-based habitus as Bourdieu focuses on. It is helpful to think about Muslimness in this way because it reflects the notion that being an authentic Muslim who possesses Muslimness is about more than just performance, but about internalizing a whole range of dispositions which is captured in the term habitus. (Moosavi, 2012: 115)

These arguments are useful because they bring together in one concept the otherwise seemingly disparate notions of performed Muslim identity and Muslim experience. Moosavi argues that there are Muslim practices and dispositions that can be deeply engrained and embodied through socialisation, but also publicly performed as a means of validation and reaffirmation. For example, Muslim converts, according to Moosavi’s study, are often subject to exclusion because they lack sufficient exposure to an ethnically informed Islamic habitus. They attempt to correct for this with strategies that include a more ostentatious performance of Muslimness. The notion of *authentic* Muslimness is therefore very important in this analysis, for it is necessary to ask not just how the nature of this authenticity is defined, but also to consider the social and performed space within which this definition might occur.

Of course, for Muslims in Britain there is no singular form of Muslimness and, rather, ideas of authenticity are typically defined in a field of power relations. Yet while there are many different ways of being Muslim and many different Muslim communities, social milieus and subcultures in the UK, this diversity of experience, collectivisation and positioning does not inhibit the construction of dominant identities in a shared Muslim public sphere. The relationship between dominant public identities and more granular or localised realities is therefore of central concern when considering the construction of authentic Muslimness. Werbner has discussed the role of ‘surface’ solidarities in relation to ‘back stage’ social demographics for British Pakistanis (a majority of whom are Muslim), with the suggestion that negatively reified identities are often overdetermined at the expense of everyday sociality. Werbner focuses on the contrast between seemingly positive and negative identities:

Stigmatised identities, defined negatively, are reified and subordinated. In the language of intersectionality, identities of gender or race imply an essentialising definitional move on the part of the wider, dominant society that subordinates and excludes. By contrast, in my reading of ethnicity as an expression of multiple identities, such identities are positive, creative, dialogical and situational. (Werbner, 2013: 410)

This point is made by Werbner to suggest that the violent, intersectional subordination of British Pakistanis as an ethnic group must be distinguished from an everyday 'convivial multiculturalism' (see Gilroy, 2004) that enables multiple identities and diasporas (British, Pakistani, Muslim, Punjabi etc.) to be fused together through public performance and celebration. It is, according to Werbner, an example of the 'situational co-existence of many valorised cultural purities' that sit prominently beyond the 'backstage' experiences of discrimination and structural inequalities.

I highlight Werbner's claim to suggest that any understanding of Muslimness – either performed or internalised – must be understood within this framework of overlapping diasporic imaginations and backstage/frontstage social realities. The notion of an 'Islamic habitus' is compelling, but it does not exist independently from other concerns, identities or imagined worlds. As well as containing distinct religious characteristics, Muslimness is an important and contested area of confluence for different and sometimes divergent social realities. Contained within the wider matrix of Muslimness are, for example, competing ethnic, class, regional and generational perspectives. This raises issues of intersectionality, whereby socially constructed identities are not static or shaped simply by their relative position to a dominant identity, but are rather also defined by their mutual relationship to one another (Hancock, 2016). Through this reading it is important to recognise that identities based on class and ethnicity (or religion, gender, sexuality, locality etc.) are combined through types of performance that can produce gradients to social influence and inclusion/exclusion. There is, therefore, a need to better understand how these perspectives, for Muslims in Britain, might coexist or creatively combine in a shared public space, but also to consider the extent to which there are underlying social forces or inequalities at work. In the remainder of this article, I examine three types of performed Muslimness for Muslim musicians, with particular reference to the intersectional nature of class and ethnicity. I begin first by looking at the centrality of a loosely defined 'Middle Eastern consumer culture' and the influence that it has on an emerging Islamic pop music scene, followed by sections that examine the way in which South Asian and Black musicians perform their Muslimness within this wider context, in ways that range from complicity, to strategic navigation and counterpublic resistance.

### **Islamic pop music: the corporate face of Muslimness**

Since the late 1990s there has been the development of a popular 'Muslim music' scene in Britain. While this label must be used cautiously – and some musicians reject any association with it – the Muslimness of this music scene is characterised not so much by musical style but by the emergence of a Muslim musical subculture. This includes Islamic recording companies, music events aimed at Muslim audiences, and, of course, Muslim musicians themselves who express Islamic concepts or Muslim subjectivities through their sound, lyrics and performance (Herding, 2013; Morris, 2016). There are three predominant musical styles within this subculture: contemporary *nasheeds*, syncretic pop styles and hip hop.

A note on methodology: the claims made in this section are based on fieldwork conducted with Muslim musicians and an analysis of Muslim media sources (e.g. print media, music videos, online forums, public interviews, performances, etc.). This analysis is therefore based on an amalgamation of multiple fieldwork sources and a wider reading of cultural trends through an ongoing immersion, by myself the researcher, in the 'Islamic pop' scene. The reflections are additionally supported by interview comments made by musicians in subsequent sections. I should also mention that the musicians of Middle Eastern heritage who are the specific focus of this discussion fall into the 'global superstar' category and have provided significant material for analysis through their public statements and performances. Sami Yusuf was approached for an interview but conflicting travel plans made the practicalities of arranging an interview unfeasible.

Contemporary *nasheeds* draw on forms of Arab song and the South Asian poetic *na'at* tradition, usually in combination with modern forms of Western *a capella* performance. *Nasheeds* place an emphasis on praise and worship, as well as being stylistically confined to the use of membranophones and a sophisticated use of the voice. The second style of music, syncretic pop, often draws on *nasheed* influences – including the overt use of Islamic themes – but is distinguished by stylistic experimentation that can touch on a range of eclectic influences from classical guitar playing and folk-rock to rap, R&B, Qawwali and Arab modal systems. These syncretic styles contribute to what might be described as a form of 'Islamic pop'. The third style of music, hip hop, is connected to a wider hip hop subculture but also self-consciously rooted in a tradition of Islamic poetry. There is an emphasis on language, rhythm and meaning, although lyrically it is less devotional with an emphasis instead on personal spirituality and wider ethical concerns.

These styles of music varyingly contribute to a loosely defined Muslim musical subculture in the UK (and indeed globally), one that is sustained through Muslim media resources, internet activity and an Islamic events circuit. While each of these styles has a partly unique, partly overlapping, audience, it is the blended form of syncretic pop music – 'Islamic pop' – that has achieved widespread commercial success. This has happened most prominently through Awakening Records, a UK based recording company founded in 2000. Awakening Records is part of the Awakening Worldwide group, a media company that has branched out in recent years to include book publishing, event management, film production and a planned television channel. Despite this diversity, the core business of Awakening remains a selection of prominent Muslim superstar musicians – including Maher Zain, Harris J and Mesut Kurtis – who have managed to penetrate Muslim markets globally. While no longer signed to the company, the multi-million album selling musician, Sami Yusuf, launched his career with Awakening Records and his early success, circa 2003, was largely responsible for ensuring the growth of what has now become an expanding Muslim media empire.

This context is necessary to understand the claims that I make in this article. While music has played a central role in the emergence of a Muslim public sphere in the UK, the diversity of this music has been somewhat dampened by the rise of a corporate media culture that

aggressively promotes a polished, often bland, uncontroversial and passive form of Islamic pop music. As with other examples of mainstream consumer culture (Goodman and Cohen, 2004), middle-class values and tastes that prioritise a privileged status quo are promoted at the expense of alternative voices and possible counterpublics. In relation to music in the Muslim public sphere, these class values are compounded by the visibility – or just as importantly, the *invisibility* – of certain ethnic identities. An examination of the artist catalogue held by Awakening Records is a testament to this claim: as well as expressing visible class features (through clothing, deportment and appearance), almost every Awakening artist projects a ‘whitewashed’ version of a generic, often Arab-influenced, Middle Eastern culture. This echoes similar claims that have been made about a wider array of Muslim media and cultural resources – that there can be a failure in the Muslim mainstream to properly represent the ethnic and cultural diversity of the *umma*.

While no longer signed to Awakening Records, Sami Yusuf is one of the most notable examples of this trend within Islamic pop music. Yusuf is an ethnic Azeri, born in Tehran but raised in London by parents who encouraged musical practice from a very young age – this included proficiency in Persian instruments such as the tar and tombak. The former is a type of stringed lute, while the latter is considered the principal membranophone of Iran – both are symbols of Persian musical identity. Yusuf was trained by a succession of teachers and musicians in both the classical traditions of Europe and the Middle East. His seven albums combine this range of musical and cultural traditions with a smooth, pop-like veneer. His most successful album, *My Ummah*, globally exceeded sales of four million – no small feat in the age of internet downloading – while his 2012 album, *Salaam*, achieved platinum status in South East Asia and at the time was the most successful album in the Middle East and North Africa.

Perhaps because of this success, Sami Yusuf has, in some respects, begun to personify an authorised image of the respectable, pious, but comfortably modern Muslim. Dressed in clothing that might often combine jeans with a shirt and jacket, projecting a sense of knowing confidence, nonetheless tempered by a humble spirituality, Yusuf’s identity appears to cohere into that of the global Muslim – educated, well-travelled, familiar with (yet uncorrupted by) the consumer culture of late-modern globalisation. However innocently this image might have been developed, it nonetheless slots neatly into global Muslim media and cultural discourses that very subtly promote a middle class and Middle Eastern image of Muslimness. Through clothing, language, accent, deportment and skin colour, a generic, class-based Middle Eastern culture becomes embedded as a seemingly ‘neutral’ or ‘universal’ marker of Muslim identity.

This cultural imprint is further reinforced by the landscapes that form the backdrop for the sanitised image of the modern Muslim. From the cityscapes of Jeddah or Cairo, to the crimson sun that sinks behind the rocky pinnacles of the Hijaz mountains – these are just some of the images that permeate the music videos of Sami Yusuf. Interwoven with these images are telling markers that signal a particular set of values. Witness the shots of



domestic households, spacious and well furnished, with styles indicative of Arab interior décor. Or consider specific scenes, such as in the city park – all sandstone and delicate palms – with a well-dressed man, designer sunglasses on his forehead, reading a book as the evening light draws in. Or Sami Yusuf and his activities across a range of music videos: from a suited presentation in a business boardroom, to driving a jeep into the desert and using a long-focus lens camera to take shots of the landscape, to scenes that involve violin playing, wood carving and teaching. The image of Sami Yusuf – a global Muslim icon – is persistently reinforced with assumptions about class and ethnicity that – because of their global ubiquity and penetration – masquerade as neutral and universal forms of identity and behaviour.

It would be unfair to accuse Sami Yusuf of being anything less than authentic. His deportment and identity are almost certainly genuine, not a cynically constructed patina for the age of consumerism. He comes from a solidly middle-class, artistic family with strong roots in the Middle East, where he spends much of his time. Yet, while the consequences of this ubiquitous discourse remain unclear, it is important to recognise that this cultural bias exists and that it has increasing traction within British Muslim cultural spheres. Sami Yusuf is not alone. There are comparable figures of success in the UK – such as Maher Zain, a Swedish-Lebanese musician – with similar public images that are reliant on notions of a supposed de-ethnicisation. Clothed in urbane modernity, conversant in the linguistic shibboleths of religion and global capitalism – Arabic and English – these public figures project a normativised vision of Muslim behaviour and identity that is nonetheless rooted in a culture of Middle Eastern consumerism and middle-class ideology.

Of course, not all musicians with a Middle Eastern heritage conform to this normativised vision, but it is clear that these tropes of Muslimness are present in the imagery of Sami Yusuf and many of the musicians represented in the Awakening Records roster. Without disparaging Sami Yusuf's undoubted musical talent, one reason for his success is the neatness with which he slots into dominant cultural and media discourses of Muslimness. Whether consciously or not, Sami Yusuf plays by 'the rules of the game', readily acquiring specific forms of Muslim cultural capital that are based on a Muslim habitus shaped by class and ethnicity. This dominant framework does not remain unchallenged in the wider Muslim music scene, but it does provide a framework within which artists must operate, with choices that range from acquiescence to critique. In the following two sections I examine how Muslim musicians from South Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds are able to operate strategically within this context.

### **South Asian cultural diasporas: resistance and renewal**

As Werbner has argued, there is often a critical interplay between an emergent British Muslim public sphere and discrete networks of ethnic activity. Individuals can be highly competent at code switching between these religious and ethnic contexts, as well as creatively combining or reconciling different imagined diasporas (Werbner, 2002). Musicians are no different and have a sophisticated strategic approach to these overlapping public

contexts. In this section I examine a range of musicians – most of whom are South Asian – in order to better understand the relationship between South Asian cultural diasporas and an emerging Muslim public sphere in Britain. While musicians bring their own personal backgrounds to bear on these contexts – and are partly responsible for shaping them – they also strategically navigate inherent public contours of ethnicity, class and religion. Given the middle-class and Middle Eastern ‘global Muslim’ expectations produced by the dominance of ‘Islamic pop’, this poses a challenge to South Asian musicians rooted in working-class communities.

Usman Rehman, the son of a professional singer from the Punjab region in Pakistan, was born and raised in one such working-class household. After having struggled with homelessness and poor schooling at an early age in Bradford, he has more recently carved out an increasingly successful career as a musician. However, Usman has had to deploy a variety of strategies in order to find an audience for his varied music:

I used to be an R&B singer, believe it or not [laughs], I was one of the first South Asian R&B, UK born and based, R&B singers. I think it was later on that I realised, or I felt, that as a South Asian R&B singer I wasn’t taken seriously. So I started taking an approach towards the South Asian scene, where I wanted to make a name and still be recognised, and that’s exactly what I did. And I did start to get recognised and I did start to get a lot of bookings. (Usman, Bradford)

Along with R&B and other styles of popular music, Usman began performing a range of Urdu and Punjabi language *na’ats* for a South Asian Muslim audience, along with covers of well-known South Asian musicians, such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Embracing the trans-Pennine South Asian cultural scene – from Leeds/Bradford, across the Pennine mill towns, to Manchester – Usman has been able to build a name for himself amongst these South Asian Muslim communities. With this reputation he is invited to perform at events, including weddings, religious celebrations and multicultural arts festivals. He has also attempted to promote himself through various South Asian Muslim media networks – including, for example, the television channels Noor TV and the Ummah Channel – as well as local radio stations, such as Radio Asian Fever (which broadcasts in a mixture of English, Urdu and Punjabi).

While the South Asian cultural scene is important as a foundation for performance and reputation, Usman has tentatively attempted to broaden his appeal to a wider British Muslim audience. Yet, he is proud of his musical heritage and he believes that South Asian music can appeal to those beyond the traditional confines of ethnic culture. Attempts at realising this include writing his own music, which is often based on South Asian classical styles of music (e.g. utilising various *ragas*), as well as incorporating pop music influences (for example, he cites Michael Jackson). It is important that such music should incorporate lyrics in Arabic or English – South Asian languages are seen as exclusionary by many young Muslims. His public image varyingly oscillates between ‘urban Asian’ (casual street clothes, jewelled earring, etc.) and ‘spiritual performer’ (*shalwar kameez*, turban, prayer mat, etc.).

Usman argues that this approach gives him a unique 'selling point' through which he can broaden his appeal to a wider British Muslim audience:

...alhamdulillah, thankfully, I've got many influences. I've combined it in creating my own influence, my own essence, my own style. So when I do classical, when I do R&B, soul, or something, I'll stick the South Asian classical style with it, you know, and it's something that you will never hear. You won't hear it because no one else does it. (Usman, Bradford)

Usman's Pakistani ethnicity and musical heritage provide both a number of constraints and opportunities. While he believes himself to be excluded from mainstream music, he is able to deploy South Asian cultural capital – in the form of South Asian musical styles and influences – as a means to access South Asian Muslim networks and communities in the north of England, as well as to potentially develop an original and attractive style of hybrid music for a wider British Muslim market. He recognises the constraints that he faces – including a sense of exclusion from the wider music industry – and adopts a strategy to take advantage of the status that his performance can achieve in South Asian cultural networks. Nonetheless, his Muslim identity and sense of belonging to a wider religious community provide him with the confidence he needs to combine musical styles and reach out to a wider Muslim audience. Crucially, though, Usman's market reach is bordered by his specific appeal to working-class South Asian and Muslim audiences. In this way, Usman – and performers like him – are shut out of an emerging Muslim cultural arena that is characterised by a de-ethnicised, yet subtly Middle Eastern, form of middle-class consumerism.

While there are many South Asian Muslim musicians who adopt a similar strategy to Usman – carefully pivoting between overlapping South Asian and Muslim contexts – there are other musicians who are more circumspect in terms of their engagement with South Asian cultural spheres. Nazeel Azami is one such musician. Born in 1981 to Bangladeshi parents, Azami was raised in Manchester and London, studying at the University of Manchester before becoming a secondary school teacher in physics. Azami's interest in music stems from a family environment that encouraged, amongst others things, the recitation of classical Bengali poetry. He released his debut album in 2006, under the Awakening Records label, entitled *Dunya*. While Azami acknowledges the subtle influence of Bengali culture on his music – including one song that directly draws from Bengali poetry – this album is clearly oriented toward a wider Muslim audience. The lyrics are overwhelmingly in English, with some Arabic (Bengali is used only once). The musical style itself is constituted by simple hand percussion, along with singing and backing vocal harmonies that largely utilise *maqams* (Middle Eastern modes), making this an exemplar of the modern *nasheed* genre.

Like a growing number of South Asian Muslim musicians, Azami produces music that moves beyond a direct rootedness in South Asian culture. He is attempting to develop a musical style that – while perhaps subtly influenced by a Bengali cultural heritage – is more overtly connected to an Arab poetic/*nasheed* tradition and the English language. Thus, while

Azami will often perform at events dominated by a South Asian Muslim audience, he approaches the audience as a 'British Muslim', not as a 'British Bengali'. This obviously involves using English instead of Bengali, but it is also more subtly reflected in his demeanour and body language, his clothing, as well as the cultural references and conceptual frameworks that he deploys during his performance. He leaves the audience in no doubt that he belongs to a British, educated, articulate, English-speaking, middle-class and professional culture. This is not to suggest that Azami attempts in any way to conceal or distort his Bengali background – a culture that would often be associated in the UK with poorly educated migrants and manual labour – merely that it is seemingly secondary to his experiences and orientation as a British Muslim, fluent in the international argot of global Islam. As with Usman, for Azami there are two distinct processes at work. First, there is a desire by Azami to pull together multiple cultural threads – ranging from the Bengali poetic tradition, to English-language lyricism, and Arab-style percussion and modal systems. As a British Muslim, and the child of Bengali migrants, Azami lays claim to these multiple cultural traditions. Yet, he furthermore orients this hybrid style toward a broader British Muslim media and popular culture that is marked by privileged class connotations. This is an attempt to appeal to a supposedly universal audience, where ethnic culture is contained and interwoven with the common currency – the cultural capital – of an international English/Arabic Muslim cultural discourse.

While Azami therefore subtly alters the notion of South Asian Muslim identity in Britain – shifting it toward supposedly universal notions of British Muslimness – it is possible to find Muslim musicians who can be critical, even scathing, of South Asian cultural 'backwardness'. Interestingly, such criticism is often part of a wider movement amongst young Muslims in Britain who believe their parents are clinging to a Pakistani or Bangladeshi culture that has little relevance for life in the UK. These critics claim that there is a blurring of South Asian culture with Islam – so called 'cultural Islam' – and that Muslims in Britain must actively understand their religion in order to discard unnecessary cultural baggage. The inability of some South Asian Muslim communities to make this change has been described by Faraz from Silk Road as 'a grotesque failure' that 'nobody will talk about'.

Silk Road are a multi-instrumental Sufi folk-rock band, combining funk, Irish folk and classical South Asian music with earnest English lyrics that are inspired by the poetry of Rumi. They are also a multi-ethnic group, with varyingly South Asian, Egyptian and White British ethnic heritages. Discussing their music and the response that it generates, Faraz explained his willingness to challenge 'flawed' cultural practice amongst some South Asian Muslims:

[The band will] happily sing love songs. We often joke with our audience, and ask them who's never been in love? As if Muslims can't sing a love song... I hope we open up and blow away a few cultural cobwebs that we really don't need, that have been passed down, particularly from South Asian culture. People aren't happy with them, they don't like them, and so people are left with the illusion of a fabricated choice that they have to either accept the culture in its totality or they have to reject it – love it or leave it. So many reject it and walk

away. But those that come back find their own little niche and their own way of being a nontribal Muslim. Of course many don't find their path and a great many people are pushed away because of cultural things which don't necessarily sit in Islam... (Faraz, Birmingham)

Faraz raises the issue of love, as one example amongst many, where a conservative, working-class South Asian culture has been mistaken for 'correct' Islamic practice. He is arguing that the modern, romanticised notion of 'love' (as conceived in contemporary popular culture) is a natural emotional experience for young Muslims in the British context. It is a challenge to diasporic South Asian culture in the UK – with its emphasis on family duty and arranged marriage (Bano, 2007; Shaw, 2000 – and established discourses relating to religious practice.

Such criticisms inevitably extend into a consideration of cultural production itself. In relation to music, an argument is advanced by some musicians to claim that diasporic South Asian culture is often uncomfortable with musical performance as practised in the contemporary European context. Two of Faraz's fellow band members, Ash and Atallah, believe they have not always had a sufficiently enthusiastic response when performing for a predominantly South Asian audience in Britain:

*Atallah:* We actually found that at lots of events the Asian community, particularly, well, not particularly because we've never played at Arab events, but they don't, they're not used to the idea of sitting down and listening to music, it's usually background music or at weddings. So actually they just tend to...

*Ash:* ...Even if they're from quite a liberal family where they'll put on music and dance, or something like that, to sit and watch a performance is something that [they just don't do].

(Ash and Atallah, Birmingham)

Ash and Atallah are both critical of South Asian performance culture, believing that in many contexts their music is not listened to in the correct way. They are emphasising the primacy of music as an *art form*, first and foremost, not as the sonic backdrop to a broader social event. Their comments do appear to somewhat accurately depict the nature of musical performance across both South Asian and Muslim cultural contexts in Britain. Music often tends to be an 'add-on' – one element of a larger event, where community, charitable or religious motivations take overt precedence. Atallah and Ash move on during the interview to suggest that this is not always or necessarily the case. They discuss the positive reception that they have had from a younger South Asian Muslim audience. They specifically mention how covers of iconic 'Brit-pop' songs – such as 'Wonderwall' by the British band Oasis – have been greeted with cheering and arm waving by an audience that participates in song during the chorus.

Silk Road are part of a small, but growing, number of musicians who are not just introducing new styles of music to the South Asian Muslim cultural context, but are

challenging longstanding notions of performance culture, and injecting socio-cultural concepts into music-meaning that will be familiar to those who have been raised in Britain. They are aligning themselves with the wider music culture in Britain – in terms of both style and performance – in order to access alternative audiences (i.e. non-Muslim audiences) and as a means to critique the perceived backwardness of a Muslim cultural sphere marked by the supposed shibboleths of South Asia. When asked directly about their place within a ‘Muslim music scene’, Atallah responded in cautiously negative terms:

Yeah, I shiver when I think of trying to fit into the Muslim music scene [laughter]. I don’t want to. Nonetheless, I appreciate nasheeds... But I think our music is an appreciation of instrumental music and it’s only for those people who want to listen to instrumental music. It’s essentially a recreational and celebratory thing, it’s what many listen to, many of the people who come to our events are quite educated, professional Muslims, who want, you know, to go to something a bit more meaningful, and spiritual, and uplifting. (Atallah, Birmingham)

To claim that music is a ‘form of art’ in this particular way suggests the utilisation and deployment of middle-class values concerning music as an aesthetic practice. The suggestion that ‘educated, professional Muslims’ are looking for something ‘a bit more meaningful’ than that offered by *nasheeds* is also telling. This statement echoes countless discussions with ‘professional’ and ‘educated’ Muslims who have denigrated *nasheeds* as ‘babyish’ and ‘naïve’, with lyrics that are more akin to ‘nursery rhymes’. However, the suggestion that *nasheeds* are an ‘inferior’ form of music – suitable only for those lacking refined taste or education – is muddled by findings that run contrary to such an analysis. Most *nasheed* artists are highly educated, in professional careers, and often have an extensive knowledge of music theory and practice.

There is then a complex relationship between overlapping South Asian and Muslim public spheres in Britain, with the emergence of a normative Muslimness that is shaped by an interweaving of class, ethnic and religious identities. Musicians operating within these contexts adopt a variety of strategies that can involve alternately navigating, challenging, or shaping prevailing norms – although I argue that there is a tendency for more middle-class values and tastes to assert themselves within performed Muslimness. For some musicians there is, furthermore, an advantage resulting from demography and an ethnically informed axis that tilts cultural power toward the influential nodes of Islamic civilisation in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Given the increasing super-diversity of Muslims in Britain, then, it is evident that these cultural arrangements do not remain uncontested or uncontroversial.

## **Black Muslim musicians: redefining Muslimness**

Whilst there is a wealth of research on African-American Muslims in the US (for example, Marable and Aidi, 2009), little has been done to map the relationship between Islam and African and Caribbean heritage communities in Britain. One notable exception is *Black Muslims in Britain* (Reddie, 2009). While this book is not based on methodologically rigorous fieldwork, it nonetheless provides an insight into how Islam has become an important religion for many Black people in the UK. Broader demographic figures support this claim: in the 2011 census, 14.5% of Black Britons were Muslim (up from 9% in 2001) and 6.9% of Muslims were Black (down from 10.1% in 2001). The number of Black Muslims has therefore continued to grow (although not as quickly as other parts of the Muslim population in Britain) and there is additional anecdotal evidence to suggest that an increasing number of Black men are converting to Islam. Interestingly, Reddie compares this movement of religious change to Rastafarianism in the 1970s:

The focus on Rastafari is vital because it was the first counter-cultural religious force to capture the affiliations and imaginations of Black youth in Britain... There are clear resemblances between the subversive approach of the Rasta movement in Britain during its heyday and the current counter-cultural positioning of Islam. (Reddie, 2009: 8)

As Reddie suggests, there are indeed interesting parallels, with a wave of young Black Muslims bringing new ideas, cultural influences and political attitudes with them when they convert to Islam. While the counter-cultural attitude of Black Muslims is often oriented toward a criticism of mainstream society – and one of the attractions of Islam for Black converts does appear to be a deep and consistent religious morality – it can also be directed at the failings of some Muslim communities themselves. Black Muslim musicians are some of the most vocal proponents of these critiques, with arguments that often hinge on their own experiences as Black performers in Muslim cultural spheres dominated by Middle Eastern and South Asian influences. Alongside this emphasis on ethnicity there is, too, an underlying discourse of class that implicitly connects Black identity to the urban struggles of African and Caribbean heritage communities in Britain. As with working-class South Asian performers, there are real or perceived barriers that limit access to performance spaces.

One of the more dispiriting issues for Black Muslim musicians and their fans, therefore, is the spectre of intra-Muslim racism. Black Muslim musicians have argued that they face discrimination when looking to perform at Islamic events, with priority instead being given to South Asian and Middle Eastern performers. This issue flared up after the Global Peace and Unity Event, in October 2010, with claims that Black Muslim musicians had their allotted performance time cut in favour of Pakistani and Arab musicians visiting from abroad. While some questioned this interpretation – suggesting that the event organisers were pushed for time and felt the need to prioritise visiting international acts – there was nonetheless an argument put forward that South Asian and Arab event organisers privileged performers from their own ethnic diasporas. This was seen as a reflection of the generally poor state of racial affairs within the wider Muslim *umma*. In an extended internet debate following the

Global Peace and Unity event, one individual described the situation in remarkably negative terms:

[W]e need to be moving away from venues that don't embrace us and create our own venues that do embrace us. I'd rather be an Afro-centric brother who happens to be Muslim and invite my African people to sit at my table than to continue to force my way to a so-called Muslim table that has no seat for me. (Jamal, Facebook, October 2010)

It is difficult to assess the extent to which this feeling pervades the spectrum of Black Muslim musicians, and indeed Black Muslims more generally. It is a sensitive issue that many are reluctant to overtly discuss and the arguments are often more nuanced than they might seem at first blush, with clear recognition by most that racism cannot be blanket-applied to all South Asian and Arab Muslims. Many stress with pride the extent to which they have strong multi-racial friendships across their young Muslim cohort – criticism is instead reserved for their perception of a cultural and ethnic exclusivism that is largely attributable to an older generation.

These arguments are part of a more general narrative relating to a cultural hierarchy across the wider British Muslim public sphere. According to the claim made by many of these musicians, Islam across the Muslim world is practised and understood through the prism of Arab culture, with a South Asian majority in Britain imposing additional aspects of diasporic culture from the sub-continent. Black Muslim musicians deploy a variety of strategies to deal with this discrimination. These strategies are rooted in an attempt to redefine notions of Muslimness in modern Britain – something that often involves a restatement of original Islamic values and beliefs. I have identified three primary strategies: (i) the visible promotion of Black ethnicities as compatible with a Muslim identity; (ii) identification with a shared, if multi-faceted British Muslimness; and (iii) stressing the inclusiveness of Islam – through the concept of the *umma* – and the consequent openness of Muslimness as a concept. I discuss each of these strategies in turn.

First, there is a noticeable effort by some Black Muslim musicians to promote their diasporic heritage alongside their Muslim identity – with the aim of showing that the two are entirely compatible. Musicians often do this by highlighting the rich cultural history of the Caribbean or Africa, and by paying homage to their roots. This can take many forms. Some musicians are noticeably vocal about their background – usually through interviews and the management of their public image – refusing to let their ethnic histories and identities become submerged within what they claim is a cultural interpretation of Islam. Sukina, from the female hip hop duo, Poetic Pilgrimage, explained during our interview that this was a frequent concern for many Black converts to Islam:

...a lot of Black people that do convert to Islam, they feel lost, they are like, who am I, who have I got to be, I don't want to be, like, Asian, I don't want to be Arab, I want to be me. (Sukina, Cardiff)



As well as celebrating their African or Caribbean ethnic heritage – refusing to let their ethnicity become a silent mark of their past – there are also clear attempts by several musicians to connect Black history with Islam. This ranges from the veneration of Malcolm X – described as an inspiring figure for *all* Black people in Britain – through to the case where Muneera from Poetic Pilgrimage described how she felt a stronger sense of Muslim identity when she found out that many African slaves brought over to the Caribbean were Muslim – this served to create a link between herself and an authentic Islamic past. It is no coincidence that the first major tour by Black Muslim musicians, in 2009, was the ‘I am Malcolm X Tour’.

Interestingly, several participants also claimed that the promotion of a strong Black identity serves to mollify disgruntled members of their respective non-Muslim communities. Apparently, there can be a suspicion that Black Muslim converts are really attempting to become ‘Arab’ or ‘Asian’. Several musicians have found that, by visibly refusing to abandon their ethnic and musical past, they are more able to share their new life as a Muslim with both friends and family.

Additional attempts to promote Black identity include the visible incorporation of musical styles from various African and Caribbean diasporas. This can involve, for instance, the utilisation of African instruments, such as the djembe, as well drawing inspiration from particular musical genres, including West African music or reggae. This includes sampling directly from such music, for example, the song ‘Land Far Away’, by Poetic Pilgrimage, is a reworking of ‘Satta Massagana’ by the Jamaican reggae group the Abyssinians. Along with the significance of Muslim musicians reworking an iconic reggae song, the video itself was filmed in the Caribbean communities of Shepherd’s Bush in London. It was in Shepherd’s Bush that the original Caribbean migrants to the UK – fresh off the *Empire Windrush* and subsequent ships from around the Commonwealth – made their home in the 1950s. Poetic Pilgrimage consider the song to be, not just a homage to their musical past, but also a song of thanks to their parents and grandparents, who struggled so hard to make a life in Britain for their children.

Another important musical connection for Black Muslim musicians – and by far the most important – is that with the ‘global hip hop diaspora’ (especially the authentic American heart of this popular genre). Several of the musicians that I interviewed stressed that hip hop should be socially conscious, dealing with important issues relevant beyond urban America. Given this ethical framework, hip hop therefore becomes the ideal vehicle to express many of the concerns that originate from an ethically acute sense of Muslimness. Female musicians additionally mention the neo-soul movement in America, which includes artists such as Lauren Hill, Jill Scott and Erykah Badu. Sukina, from Poetic Pilgrimage, made comparisons between female neo-soul artists from the United States and her identity as a Black Muslim woman in the British context:

The women of this movement were so dignified and gracious in how they carried themselves as women. They were like, you know, they covered their

hair and they dressed very modestly and, they had strong, afrocentric tendencies. (Sukina, Cardiff)

Sukina – a convert to Islam with Jamaican roots – is looking across the Atlantic and finding inspiration for her own sense of Muslimness. The identities, bearing, clothing and deportment of these (non-Muslim) neo-soul artists have helped Sukina to define herself as a Black Muslim woman in contemporary Britain. While Sukina's own personal experiences are of course interesting, it is her highly visible role as a musician and public figure that will potentially have a wider impact on notions of Muslimness in the British, European and indeed global Muslim context. While the consequences of this are difficult to measure, these musicians do offer a counter-cultural discourse that challenges dominant ethnic and gender values in the wider British Muslim public spheres. It is a counter-cultural discourse that, by raising the profile of African and Caribbean ethnicity, alters notions of exactly what Muslimness means.

A second strategic disposition adopted by some Black Muslim musicians is an attempt to engage with a conception of *British Muslimness*. There are two strands to this discourse. The first involves a struggle for the recognition that Black Muslims have their own specific set of experiences within the multifaceted spectra of British Muslim experience. Black Muslim musicians therefore promote the idea that Black British Muslim identities have equal legitimacy for their contribution to a broader picture of British Muslimness. Importantly, this incorporates influences from the history of African and Caribbean migrants to the UK; the contemporary experiences of Black people in Britain; and the unique perspective that Black converts, in particular, are able to offer. A sense of national identity and belonging – of *Britishness* – is used as a means to make the case for Black Muslimness within a wider Muslim community. This is a suggestion that, despite the ethnic differences that can fracture Muslim solidarity in Britain, there are nonetheless connecting threads of shared national and religious belonging. Rabiah, from Pearls of Islam, a female singer-songwriter duo, argues that music and performance have instilled her with a greater sense of confidence in her identity:

Pearls of Islam brought out confidence in all of us.... I think I understand and I'm happy with who I am: an Afro-Caribbean British Muslim women. When you're put in that position, when you get so many questions and doubts that come up in your own mind, you have to deal with it. We're always thinking that it's a spiritual journey that we're on. (Rabiah, London)

Rabiah and other Black Muslim musicians often subtly blend their ethnic identity into a broader tapestry that contains other religious and national identities. Taking this context into account, Black Muslim musicians have been described by some as the authentic voice of a *community within a community* – a voice that sometimes struggles to be heard in the wider British Muslim conversation.

An additional and related aspect of this strategy is the promotion of shared British Muslim experience. This involves acknowledgement that Muslims in the UK face a set of challenges that can only be overcome through a sense of unity and a vision of the common weal. Black Muslim musicians are therefore seen as legitimated in dealing with issues portrayed as affecting Muslim communities across Britain: from discourses on radicalism and political discrimination, to issues around Islamophobia and inter-faith relations. These arguments are deployed to prioritise British Muslim musicians – crucially including the voice of Black Muslims – over the imposition of transnational musicians who appeal only to a specific diasporic grouping. For instance, performance events have been criticised for not including a significant number of English-language musicians – that is, musicians who are able to speak directly to the British experience. Referring to a Global Peace and Unity event from several years prior, and within the context of a debate about discrimination against Black performers, one individual commented:

I'm a Londoner and didn't see *any* Londoners, or any fellow British person for that matter perform that night apart from Yusuf Islam! Ain't being funny but the majority didn't wanna listen to old school acoustics... it's good to see our brothers performing from all over the world in diff lingos, but we wanted to see our English brothers too and be proud of 'em. (Nabil, Facebook, October 2010)

As this comment makes clear, the notion of a shared British Muslim community – a community that one *can* and *should* be 'proud of' – a community further localised into the idea of being both English and from London – emphasises the important role that national belonging can play in asserting specific ethnic entitlements. Black Muslimness is seen as more relevant for Muslims in the UK because of its rootedness in the specifics of British Muslim experience – unlike performers from South Asia or the Middle East.

The third and final discourse strategically deployed by Black Muslim musicians (and indeed others) is the universality of Islam and the inclusive nature of the Muslim *umma*. There are multiple themes that run throughout this concept. First and foremost, the ethnic and racial diversity of Islam is seen as evidence for the universal appeal of the 'true faith' – it is something to be inspired by and it is something that sets an example for the rest of the world. Many Muslim musicians see their multi-ethnic fan-base as living evidence of this claim. They note with extreme pride their ability to reach out to different audiences – ascribing this success to the distinct nature of Muslim diversity. It is through such diversity, many argue, that a more sensitive and responsive understanding of the world can be achieved. Despite this optimistic outlook, this ideal is also understood by many as a utopian aim that has not yet been fully realized by the Muslim world. Indeed, it is often suggested that the *umma* has a number of very troubling issues relating to racism and cultural tolerance. A vision of the original multi-racial community created by the Prophet Muhammad – including the story of the companion of the Prophet, and former slave, Bilal – is one narrative through which these perceived failings are challenged. Sympathetic religious

scholars are often referenced by Black Muslim musicians in order to provide legitimacy to the claim that the Muslim *umma* must struggle to live up to its own aspirational ideals.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes to a debate concerning religious and cultural change for Muslims in Britain. I have argued that there are distinct class fractures running through Muslim cultural production in Britain and that these cannot be isolated from ethnicity. It seems clear that younger Muslims – many of whom possess greater levels of social and cultural capital than previous generations – are tending to move away from a passive mimesis of ethnic musical style in an attempt to forge new cultural modes of expression for the British context. This runs counter to traditional cultural practices where older, rooted ethnic minority social groups tended to preserve diasporic culture as a connection to an historical homeland. As new forms of music and cultural expression are increasingly developed within emerging British Muslim public spheres – especially the globally marketed ‘Islamic pop’ genre – this anarchic milieu is increasingly shaped by dominant values, behaviours and tastes. It is therefore possible to point toward an educated, middle-class Muslim elite that is responsible for driving many of these changes – an elite that is furthermore rooted in business, media and organisational networks of influence and power. This contains an inherent set of cultural expectations that are oriented toward global Muslim markets and shaped by a prevailing Muslim culture of Middle Eastern consumerism. As I have indicated, these trends are not without contestation and critique. As forms of Muslim consciousness in Britain continue to develop (Meer, 2010), an ongoing part of this story will be the way in which the super-diversity of Muslims in Britain is adequately reconciled in the public sphere.

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