

Embodying the Qur'an in 21st century Britain: a case-study with a Muslim university student

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Abstract

Adolescent Muslims in Britain grow up in an increasingly religiously divergent and pluralistic globalised society. Technological advancement and multiculturalism has opened doors to new forms of religious practice such as Qur'anic prayer apps or ringtones. Amidst these diverse communities young Muslims must find their own path to living a religiously and spiritually meaningful life. Underlying this are complex processes of identity formation including the religious dimension of identity. Individual, personal practice of religion embedded in the complexity of day-to-day life is a central shaping force. This dissertation offers an ethnographic account of the role of the Qur'an in a female Muslim's student life in the 21st century whilst also analysing the complexity of the religious dimension of Muslim identity. The empirical data is based on fieldwork that took place for six months. The empirical strategies employed were diary-interview method and participant observation. Rooted in an interdisciplinary body of literature such as Islamic studies, music-ethnology, religious studies and anthropology, it offers a nuanced account on the holistic experience of how one can find spiritual and religious meaning in Qur'anic activities. While this case study is an original and timely contribution to the study of Muslims in Britain, it draws on wider theoretical concepts in the academy. It offers an alternative view to the polarised and contested concept of Muslim identity. This thesis will identify the influential force of the everyday experience of religion as a significant aspect of identity formation processes. It will demonstrate how a young Muslim woman finds creative ways to embody the Qur'an through non-traditional but meaningful spiritual and religious Qur'anic activities. As this thesis will show, individual religious practice empowers young Muslim women to successfully negotiate diverse, fluid and flexible religious identities beyond aspects of social policy, public perception and Islamophobic discourse.

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Glossary

A note on translation

Throughout this thesis non-English terms have been used where appropriate. For the sake of simplification I have abstained from formal transliteration and used standard Latin alphabet instead. All of the terms concerned have been italicised to acknowledge their non-English origin. Standardized terms that have become part of the English language such as Allah, Qur'an and Ramadan remain in normal form.

<i>adhan</i>	The call to prayer
<i>Allah</i>	God
<i>Alhamdulillah</i>	'All thanks and praise to God'
<i>Bismillah</i>	'In the name of God'
<i>Dhikir/zikr</i>	Remembrance of God
<i>Dua</i>	Form of prayer
<i>fajr</i>	Morning prayer
<i>fatwa</i>	Religious ruling
<i>hadith</i>	Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad
<i>hadra</i>	Sufi devotional practice of praying, recitation and dhikir
<i>hijab</i>	veil
<i>Iqra</i>	Arabic for 'recite', 'speak out'
<i>Istighfar</i>	God's forgiveness
<i>Kitab</i>	Arabic for 'book'
<i>Mashallah</i>	Expression of appreciation, joy, praise
<i>Nadwas</i>	Private gatherings
<i>niqab</i>	Face covering veil
<i>niyah</i>	Intention
<i>Qira'ah</i>	Correct recitation of the Qur'an
<i>Rahma</i>	God's Mercy
<i>sama</i>	listening

<i>Salat</i>	Obligatory ritual prayers
<i>sakina</i>	Relaxation state
<i>sipara</i>	30 divided parts of the Qur'an
<i>Tajweed</i>	Techniques for correct recitation of the Qur'an
<i>wudu</i>	Ablution

1.0 Introduction

On a mellow Tuesday afternoon in early July, a young woman has opened the window of her dorm room on Cardiff University campus wide. The room is her temporary home and she is using the time between lunch and afternoon classes to clean her room. As she tidies up her desk, dusts the cupboards and cleans her bathroom the magnificent sound of the Qur'an unfolds in the background, evoking a somewhat spiritual atmosphere and divine presence. This cleaning exercise is a Qur'anic activity that Rabya, a Muslim student enrolled at a British university, engages in quite regularly. An action that has become a means for spiritual refreshment and a unique form to praise Allah. Throughout the centuries, the Qur'an 'has fired the imagination [...] of hundreds of millions of people' (Cantwell Smith 1971, p.133). To this day, the various forms of Qur'anic activities play a central role in the hearts and minds of Muslim communities. This spiritual cleaning activity is but one example of the wealth of new religious possibilities of modern day practices of the Qur'an. Technological advancement in particular makes it possible for Islamic tradition to flourish in new realms of religious practice. In the last few decades the Qur'an has increasingly become part of popular culture, is available on tapes, cassettes, mp3s and more recently on the Internet in textual as well as oral form. Although these developments facilitate the means for traditional Qur'anic practice such as memorization and recitation of the Qur'an, this new form of Qur'anic presence in daily life also gives room for an indefinite number of individual practices. These may take any shape or form, develop out from traditional practice, be transformed and put together anew for personal spiritual and religious merit in contemporary British Muslim life. It is the uniqueness of individual Qur'anic practices that will be the focus of attention throughout this dissertation.

Research Aim

My aim is to explore the holistic experience of practices involving the Qur'an by focusing on physical as well as mental aspects of Qur'anic activities. I will

document and analyse how a young female Muslim embodies the Qur'an in the 21st century as an individual part of a secular community at university. In doing so, I will make extensive claims about Muslim identity formation processes regarding embodiment and individualisation of religion, Islamic spirituality and the negotiation of religious identity and agency. I will draw on a range of extensive streams of interdisciplinary literature from the fields of Islamic studies, sociology of religion, music-ethnology, religious studies and anthropology. While I address a series of issues related to the study of the embodiment of the Qur'an on epistemological, ontological and methodological dimensions, the overarching discourse is the importance of the personal and individual dimension of Muslim identity. Central to this thesis is my claim that in order to really make sense of Muslim identity and in particular to empower young female Muslims in the wider scope of our body of knowledge we need to take the complex nature and multifaceted dimension of personal and individual practice of religious identity into consideration. Through my examination of the embodied nature of Qur'anic practices I will demonstrate how a young Muslim woman uses religious sources that have been digitised (Campbell, 2013) to negotiate agency and transform her identity in relation to religion, politics, and cultural practice in a shared, public, secular space.

Research Agenda

This research agenda gently developed over the course of my fieldwork. In the first instance, my interest in Qur'anic practice originated from my fascination with its oral tradition and the power of the sound itself. Although I had elected Qur'anic activities as an empirical scope to investigate the role of sacred texts in a young persons contemporary British Muslim life, the specifics of this research agenda were entirely driven by my early experience of the ethnographic fieldwork. Before I go into more detail about the empirical ground of this dissertation, I must first elaborate upon my research agenda that characterises the outcome of this study. My work is rooted in a body of Islamic literature and ethno-musicological case studies of the Qur'an, with a particular socio-scientific focus on the role and influence of sacred Qur'anic texts in Muslim societies. The way I think about the

sacred texts of the Qur'an evolves from religious studies literature of religious expression, embodiment and materialisation. This thesis therefore is a product of a wealth of interdisciplinary influences. As I will argue in my literature review, I feel that this approach is needed in order to make sense of Qur'anic embodiment and at the same time address cultural, religious and spiritual factors. Focusing on Qur'anic activities allowed me to perpetrate the overlapping processes and negotiations of praxis and belief which makes for a more nuanced understanding of the Qur'an in the 21st century, as I consider the interplay between religion, culture and politics in a public, secular space. The last century has seen the emergence and rapid growth of Muslim populations in Britain, with a distinctly young age profile, and with a significant proportion of people under the age of 30.¹ These younger generations face a wealth of ongoing societal changes such as proceeding cultural and economic globalisation and evolving information technology leading to 'opportunities for youth to make choices among a wider variety of life options' (Mortimer and Larson, 2002 p.2). Options for lifestyle and significant life decisions have multiplied and will 'influence the experience of adolescence in the future' (ibid., p.1). The path to adulthood for these generations is therefore influenced by specific social, economic, political and technological factors generating future generations of Muslim communities in British society.

Meeting Rabya

Due to the practicality and restraints of a three month Masters thesis, I confined my empirical investigation to the experience of one particular student. In Chapter 3 I will give a detailed explanation of why I felt it was necessary to do so based on epistemological as well as methodological consideration about to the study of religious experience. During the early stage of the project I was more or less 'hanging around' with other Muslim postgraduate students that lived in the same university accommodation as me, and passively stated my interest in the Qur'an (see Harrington, 2003, Gilliat-Ray, 2005). Rabya, a 28-year old Pakistani Muslim fellow

¹ 48 % of Muslims in Britain are under 25, and over four in five people under the age of 50 (2011 Census)

postgraduate student at Cardiff University quickly became someone who I would talk to about the Qur'an quite regularly. One conversation on a Saturday afternoon influenced and shaped the nature of this study in particular.

The intellectual turning point

Rabya described how the Qur'an had played a major role in her struggles with mental health conditions such as anxiety, insomnia and depression. For example, members of her immediate family would try to help her by suggesting passages of the Qur'an to overcome her struggles and ease her pain. This was truly fascinating to me. As I explored the available literature on the Qur'an in particular and the daily practice of religion more broadly from various angles such as sociology of religion, music-ethnology and anthropology, I could not forget about Rabya's experiences with the Qur'an. I was intrigued by the transformative power of the Qur'an far exceeding the devotional and spiritual purpose that most of the literature seemed to be focussing on. At the end of that particular conversation Rabya thanked me for listening to her stories, and I can only guess that the opportunity to speak openly about her situation may have had a beneficial effect, so I offered to continue our conversation any time she would like. As a researcher, my interest had been captured, and my original broad interest in devotional and traditional oral tradition shifted to a more narrow focus on the personal, individual practice of Islamic tradition in a time when religious possibilities have multiplied and opened new avenues for individual religious agency and expression. Hence this particular conversation with Rabya became a 'fieldwork-first situation' (Yin, 2012 p.1) and the starting point of my empirical investigation. The next time I saw Rabya, I asked her if she would be interested in participating in my study to continue our conversation. It was only then that somewhat more detailed and nuanced research questions began to develop in my mind. If I was to work with Rabya, I would most likely be unable to observe a great deal of traditional and ritual Qur'anic practice, because most of her stories about her personal practice painted a picture of a rather unique and individual style of practice.

Research Agenda

As is often the case with ethnographic research interests, this study did not follow a definite number of research questions that needed answering. Instead, as is the case with most anthropological fieldwork, specific questions gradually unfolded and developed over the course of the fieldwork. I was interested in any kind of Qur'anic presence in daily life, and in particular in various Qur'anic activities; established traditional practices as well as personal adaptations. Starting questions were for example, where does Rabya engage with the Qur'an, what are some of the socio-spacial implications and requirements? When, how and why does she access the Qur'an, which medium would she use? Does she predominantly read the Qur'an or listen to it? Once I became able to form a basic understanding of the presence of the Qur'an in her daily life, I would then need to think about some of the major driving forces that shape her daily life praxis. How would social factors such as culture, her own biography and the environment inform her Qur'anic activities? Which sources of knowledge transmission and authority does she adhere to? Overall, it was necessary to develop a detailed understanding of her thoughts, her wishes, and her behaviour to learn something about the meaning of the Qur'an and its role in her day-to-day life. Only then was I able to learn what became a central question towards the end of the fieldwork: how would she use the Qur'an to employ individual religious agency and subsequently form her religious identity as a female Muslim student?

I argue, that Rabya's Qur'anic practices are a result of complex processes of negotiating her identity and exert religious agency, to live a meaningful religious, spiritual life on a secular campus. I strongly emphasise that while I give an in-depth account of how one Muslim student embodies the Qur'an in the 21st century, this thesis is certainly not representative of *all* Muslim students. Nonetheless, Rabya's experience offers interesting phenomenological insights into the new possibilities and social reality of modern religious activity in contemporary Britain. This indicates the wealth of fascinating interplays of modern ideas of religion and individuality, pointing to the 'subjective turn' in contemporary practice (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). I present this study on the experience of embodying the Qur'an as a means of

showing the fluid interplay that exists between the notion of traditional Islamic practice and late-modern individuality. Central to my thesis, therefore, is my argument that the individual dimension of religious identity is a central part of identity formation processes and must not be ignored.

2.0 Literature Review

Introduction

In this section I will consider some of the relevant academic literature that inspired the intellectual framework of this project. The objective is to ground my research in the existing literature and locate its place within our current body of knowledge. By means of a systematic literature review I will analyse academic enquiry about the Qur'an and illuminate key discussions about Qur'anic practices. This section will allow me to examine the potential of my work to be a timely contribution in the academy. In order to organise this literature review, I have utilised the most common themes that are pertinent to organise this review: Islamic scripture, Islamic practice, Islamic sound and materialisation of religion.

2.1 Islamic Scripture: The Qur'an

'The book lives on among its people, [it is the] stuff of their daily lives, taking for them the place of a sacrament. For them these are not mere letters or mere words. They are the twigs of the burning bush, aflame with God.' (Padwick, 1961 p.119)

The early Beginnings of the written Word

Although Western scholarship identifies Islam as one of the three major 'book religions' (Madigan, 2001), a Muslims' relationship with Islamic scripture is more complex than that. Over time, codification processes of originally orally transmitted text led to the *kitab*, an edited and published book (Schoeler, 2010).² The complexity of the book itself surmounts western perception of using scripture. For instance this can be seen in the first revelatory encounter of the Prophet

² Occasional notes of orally transmitted Qur'anic passages to a deliberate collection of sacred texts into the *kitab*, a physical book, only gradually developed throughout the early centuries of Islam after the death of the prophet.

Muhammad, who opened with the word *iqra*, meaning 'recite', 'speak out' (Denny, 1989). The opening command to 'recite, in the name of your lord' (Q 96, 1-5) further emphasises this. Despite a Christo-Judaic tendency to think of scripture in a predominantly textual form, the authoritativeness of Islamic sacred texts is only fully realised and perfected when they are recited aloud. Not dissimilar to Vedic texts, 'the book of holy writ in Islam is [...] a holy 'reciting' or 'recitation' (Graham, 1987 p.80). Islam therefore holds a unique position in the Abrahamic traditions, as 'the written word has always been secondary to a strong [...] aural presence' (ibid., p.79). Indeed, as many textual scholars have observed, Muslims understand sacred texts of the Qur'an to be founded and centred upon the 'active, spoken word of God, given in its most perfect [...] final form to humankind' (ibid., p.81). This is based on the sacred status of the actual words, which a Muslim knows to be the 'sublimely beautiful and untranslatable language of God' (ibid., p.85). The significance of the Arabic language in sacred texts of the Qur'an can therefore hardly be overemphasized, even if the practitioner speaks little or no Arabic. In summary, Qur'anic texts are the medium through which God speaks Muslims. Hence these sacred texts are not only a fundamental part of Islamic ritual and devotional practice but have greatly influenced and shaped Islamic tradition.

The oral Qur'an as cultural resource

Throughout the centuries, the Qur'an has been the medium par excellence of divine-human encounter for Muslims of all times, places and persuasions. This divine-human relationship is primarily embodied through the oral practice of scripture. As Graham and Kermani (2006) note, its spiritual and aesthetic reception has foremost been linked with its orality and has only secondly been inscribed as written scripture. For many, oral tradition is 'at the centre of Islamic corporate and individual piety' (Denny, 1989 p.5) and 'at least as strong, and in some instances stronger, than the written [tradition]' (Coward, 1988 p.161). When Muslims listen to the sacred texts of the Qur'an they participate in an experience with meaning far beyond the immediate sound or occasion (Nelson, 1985). The most direct experience of divine presence is to be found in hearing the 'concrete text, the very words of the

Qur'an' (Graham, 1987 p.87). The crux is therefore for us to break free from the traditional Western notion of scripture and develop a broader awareness of sensitive oral/aural worlds of sacred texts. Although the Qur'an functions both as written and spoken word in a Muslim's life, oral Qur'anic practices will be of particular interest to socio-scientific study because 'the immanence of the Qur'an in Islamic society is essentially oral' (Nelson, 1985 p.188). Kristina Nelson further explains that the pervasive sound of recitation is essential to a Muslims' sense of culture and religion, making oral tradition a form of cultural resource (Fishman, 2010). Cultural resource evolving directly from oral tradition 'is still a major element in the character of these societies' (Nelson, 1985 p.96). Therefore the recitative function of the Qur'an continues to be of paramount importance in public ritual as well as private devotional life.

Social Status and Religious Identity

While Nelson discusses Muslims' Qur'anic sense of culture and religion as a major influence in Egyptian society, her empirical data on public ritual and private Qur'anic practices remains phenomenological and predominantly focuses on a reciter's experience of learning to recite the Qur'an. Although she shows that the phenomenological experience of human-divine Qur'anic encounter shapes ritual and devotional life in Egypt, her work does not elaborate on how these processes happen; what these various practices may actually look like and how the Qur'anic medium might be embodied in society. Rasmussen's (2010) more recent ethno-musicological study of Qur'anic recitation practices in Indonesia also shows that the sound of the recited Qur'an resonates much more than literal text or religious tenets. It becomes a 'sonic and symbolic package of cross-cultural histories and relationships as well as signifier of contemporary identity and practice' (ibid., 2010 p.8). *De facto* the sound of the Qur'an not only functions as a cultural resource, it also 'operates as a summarising symbol of spirituality, history and identity' (ibid., 2010 p.9). Her observations on the authoritative religious roles of female reciters in Indonesian society are an important contribution to the literature exemplifying the transformative power of the Qur'an. These dynamic, responsive dimensions of the

Qur'an should be studied as they are central to understanding the Islamic religion and identity of Muslims (Madigan, 2001). Rasmussen identified their identities as female reciters as an important aspect determining religious authoritative status. Female social status and religious leadership are but one example indicating the potential influence of scripture in Muslim societies. The sociological focus on scripture will require a detailed examination of the social processes involved. This type of study is long overdue if we are to understand the current lived religion and religious identities of Muslims. Opinderjit Takhar's (2014) recent study on scripture as an important marker in Sikh identity formation supports this claim; his research is a timely and pioneering example of the increasing of the socio-political significance of scripture.

The Living Tradition of the Qur'an

Graham and Kermani (2006) are leading voices arguing that 'we must attend [...] to the living tradition of Qur'an recitation as it is found in contemporary centres such as Cairo' (p.119) to understand the place of the Qur'an in Muslim societies. Although they identified the need to study practices of the Qur'an in its various forms their focus is limited. In fact, scholars committed to the study of various Qur'anic practices (such as memorization or recitation practices) focus on Muslim communities outside of the Western hemisphere. Despite the presence of significant Muslim populations across Europe and North America, academic interest to date predominantly remains in countries such as Morocco (Boyle, 2004), Egypt (Nelson, 1985, Hirschkind, 2006) and Indonesia (Rasmussen, 2010, Gade, 2004).³ Widening the scope of textual, ethno-musicological and socio-scientific research is thus necessary, as these aspects of Islam offer great potential to enrich our knowledge of contemporary British Muslim communities. There is a need for location- and time-specific socio-scientific research as sacred texts serve 'particular people at a particular time' (Cantwell Smith, 1993 p.45). Therefore, although the 'use of the Qur'an in daily life by pious Muslims [...] demonstrates its continuing presence into

³ A recent exception is Morris' (2013) unpublished PhD thesis 'Sounds Islamic' which included a questionnaire on Qur'anic recitation practices in the UK.

their lives' (ibid., p.101), its role will vary greatly. Social processes, in particular meaning-making processes in human-divine encounters through Qur'anic practice will depend on location, time and socio-economic as well as socio-political circumstances. These are important parameters that shape this research, as the sacred texts of the Qur'an are 'not just a seventh-century Arabian document [...but...] equally a ninth- a fourteenth- an eighteenth- and a twentieth-century document' (Cantwell Smith, 1980 p.505) through which God directly speaks to his people.

2.2 Islamic Sound: The Qur'an in a Global Age

In the 21st century, Qur'anic tradition flourishes in many new ways due to technical advancement (Leemhuis, 2006).⁴ The spread of higher education, literacy, mass media, migration and urbanization means that 'alternate religious possibilities are more generally available than ever before' (Berger in Ammerman, 2007 p.vi). These possibilities can 'impact on the real lives of individuals, at significant and at mundane levels' (Bunt, 2000 p.1) when sacred texts of the Qur'an are being accessed online via services such as the 'Qur'an Explorer' and 'YouTube'. Technological advancement provides new opportunities to adapt sacred texts to suit individual needs and daily life concerns. Qur'anic practice therefore surmounts traditional devotional practice, taking various forms and shapes in contemporary society. Recent examples of revived Qur'anic practice are for instance the emergence of popular reciters; so called 'pop stars of the Muslim world' (Bunt, 2009 p.80) and media-related *fatwas* (religious rulings). For instance the prohibition for the use of Qur'anic verses as mobile phone ringtones by the Saudi Arabian Islamic jurisprudence council in 2007.⁵

Academics are concerned with these modern forms of Qur'anic practice and the role of the digital interface of religious activity. Given that one can maintain a relationship

⁴ For instance capturing the recitation on various sound-recording media, opportunities to transmit the Qur'an through radio and television broadcasts, websites offering various translations and recitation styles of the Qur'an as well as online courses teaching one how to recite (Leemhuis 2006).

⁵ 'Qur'anic ringtones haram' Arab News, 9. Nov 2007

with God online, how are we to understand these virtual practices? In his book 'iMuslims – rewiring the house of Islam' Gary Bunt wonders 'in what ways does it [online practice] apply traditional conventions and in what ways are innovations utilized to interact with the divine?' (ibid., 2009 p.81). The dynamic, responsive dimensions of sacred texts are therefore evidently a rudimentary part of Islamic media studies. The nature of these debates is, however, phenomenological; focusing on the experience of the personal human-divine relationship channelled through modern media. Media scholars have yet to consider the social complexity of new cultural resources inherent in adaptive practices.

Islamic Practice: Listening, Reciting and Memorizing Sacred Texts

Elementary ways Muslims engage with the Qur'an are *sama* (listening practices), recitation and memorization. To identify and cover relevant material among the literature I conducted a systematic search via three databases: the 'British Humanities Index', 'Index Islamicus' and 'Google Scholar'. Each database was fed with various combinations of the key words 'Qur'an/Koran', 'Muslim/Islamic practice' and '(religious) practice'. Relevant research was identified through available abstracts that were scanned for discussions of Islamic practices in relation to the Qur'an such as observance of prayers and religious festivals. Database results showed, however, that there is *de facto* very little academic research on the actual practice of Islam.⁶ The following paragraphs present the result of my search, utilised to present a comprehensive overview of academic discourse on Qur'anic practices.

The Qur'an in Private and Public Domains

Arguably, the most omnipresent Qur'anic sound in Muslim countries is the *adhan* (the call to prayer), when a muezzin summons the faithful to their ritual devotions (Cragg, 1956). In the UK context the call to prayer has become a part of the sound landscape through various technological devices such as mobile phones (Bunt, 2009, see also Gale, 2005, Eade, 1996). The last third of Ramadan in general

⁶ Instead focus often rests on ideological belief and textual/historic study of the Qur'an dominated.

and the 27th night in particular are for example seen as auspicious for recitation and these nights are filled with public Qur'an recitation events and gatherings. Another form of communal *sama* practice is *nadwa* (gathering and listening sessions) in private homes (McAuliffe, 2006). Every practicing Muslim also recites portions of the Qur'an during daily worship (Coward 1988). The 'opening' (Graham and Kermani, 2006) sequence for all of the ritual prayers, 'Sura Al-Fatiha' (Q 1) can hardly be overemphasised, as it is also a part of virtually every formal occasion and that almost every Muslim knows by heart. From birth to death, virtually every action a Muslim takes, let alone every solemn event in his or her life, is potentially an occasion for some form of Qur'anic recitation such as the reciting of 'Sura Al-Yasin' (Q 36) upon the approach of death or burials. As Graham and Kermani (2006) note, there are many discrete phrases that have passed into everyday usage. Spoken words of the Qur'an such as *bismillah* (in the name of God, the merciful the compassionate), which typically foregoes mundane, routine acts such as eating or drinking are very common. Other examples of everyday usage of the Qur'an are *mashallah* (of Q 18:39) and *alhamdulillah* (of Q 1:2) to invoke *rahma* (God's mercy) or *istighfar* (God's forgiveness). Another form of communal recitation is ritual chanting during *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) sessions in Sufi brotherhoods and particular mosques (McAuliffe, 2006). Individually, Muslims also recite the Qur'an for religious merit, for reflection on its meaning and for spiritual refreshment (Denny, 1989). 'Sura al-Baqara' (The Cow, Q 2) for instance is often recited before going to sleep as it contains prayers for forgiveness. In summary, the words of the Qur'an can be heard throughout all the different social worlds, ranging from private, more intimate encounters to more communal, public occasions. Islamic texts of the Qur'an are therefore indeed a vital cultural resource for Muslim communities.

The Importance of Memorising the Qur'an

Typically associated with Qur'anic recitation is a particularly fascinating Islamic tradition, namely the memorization of the Qur'an. For many Muslims, 'prayer is usually interpreted to mean the recitation of the Koran' (Wagner, 1991 p.265). Memorization is understood to be the process that 'seamlessly unites the physical

and the mental in the formation and enactment of religious and cultural practice' (Boyle, 2004 p.83). Oral recitation also traditionally allowed the Qur'an to become a presence in the lives of those who could not read it themselves. Even today, although to a lesser extent, its beauty and power is communicated through the ability to hear it being recited, making it accessible for people unable to read and write (ibid.). However, with the wider availability and affordability of written and recorded texts and higher literacy rates, the ability to recite the Qur'an is not as dependent, as it used to be, on sheer memorisation. In this global day and age, 'multiple delivery channels are available' (ibid. p.88). Regardless of practicality, memorization foremost constitutes an important part of Islamic education as the first step of seeking understanding and knowledge. Muslim parents do not put their child in a Qur'an school solely to follow religious ritual, but to form her or him according to the 'immutable [Islamic] tradition' (Graham and Kermani, 2006 p.122). Qur'anic formation processes commence over time as 'the meaning of it will keep gradually unfolding itself' (Wagner, 1983 p.185).

As this brief summary shows, many cultural, ritual and traditional practices of the Qur'an have captured the interest of academics. They have, however mainly observed social consequences of scripture in the social world. The (feelings/emotions/senses) dimension of Qur'anic practice has been neglected for the most part.

The Affective Dimension of Qur'anic Practices I: Human Emotions

Western Islamic scholarship has a tendency to focus on the human-divine relationship in devotional Qur'anic practices. As some of their comments show, however, passages of the Qur'an not only affect one's relationship with God. More attention needs to be paid to the affective consequences of this relationship. What purpose may people find in recitation practices aside from devotional offerings? To what extent do people stick to traditional practices and religious rulings, and how do they adapt and create their own practices to suit their daily lives? One area that has altogether been ignored is the range of human emotions in Qur'anic practices. Strong negative feelings such as depression and anxiety are two human conditions

that would probably naturally draw most Muslims to the Qur'an. I therefore conducted a second systematic search, specifically looking for research on emotions and the Qur'an. This search, however, was largely unsuccessful. The keywords 'depression', 'anxiety', 'emotion/feelings' were combined in various combinations with the search term 'Qur'an/Koran'. "Google scholar" detected about 6.600 findings in 0.4 seconds on the keywords 'depression and Qur'an', which was the only successful combination.⁷ Unlike Western academies, global interest in mental health and religious practice in the last three decades has created a vast body of academic literature, particularly in medical sciences (Azhar and Varma, 1995, Ebrahimi, 2003, Ahadi et al., 2011, Sooki et al., 2011, Khan et al., 2010). Although the presentation of these search results is a commentary rather than a qualitative assessment of these studies, they point to what seems to be central in most of the literature: the perpetuating question of embodiment. Embodiment must then involve both Qur'anic practice (acts) and affect (feelings/emotions/senses), and both cannot be studied in isolation.

The Affective Dimension of Qur'anic Practices II: Embodying Human Emotions

A study from this pool of research that is particularly relevant is a study published by Kimiaee et al. (2012) on Qur'an memorization, claiming that Qur'an memorization can improve people's mental health. This poses questions such as what happens to the actual physical body during recitation or memorization, and how do Muslims experience this embodiment? How does the Qur'an change physical and mental conditions? Helen Boyle's (2004) work on memorisation has begun to tackle these questions. Western embodiment theories served as a basis to observe how contemporary Moroccan Qur'anic schools link abstract ideas of learning, worship and moral direction to concrete bodily things. Most of Boyle's participants described the concept that the Qur'an becomes present in their children's hearts and minds. What Boyle was unable to answer though, is 'how does this embodiment

⁷ It is worth noting that not all 6.600 results actually address mental health and the Qur'an, but the fact that both other index services came up with 0 results with the same key words speaks for itself.

occur? How can we understand it?' (Boyle, 2004 p.89). To address these questions, embodiment, as a theoretical concept needs to be unpacked. Building on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bordieu, the body interacting with the Qur'an should not be seen as 'a brute fact of nature' (Csordas, 1994 p.1) but a crossroads for cultural production as the body is the 'existential ground of culture' (Csordas, 1990 p.5). The body is then a 'basic and ramifying feature of the human condition' (Strathern, 1996 p.2). A theory of embodiment can thus bridge the Cartesian dichotomy embedded in Western thinking which makes it difficult to think about the Qur'an as embedded in someone's heart or mind. Indeed, embodiment then becomes 'a mediator [...] between the ideas of the physical and the social body' (Boyle, 2004 p.87). Boyle consequently argues that the body needs to be seen as a concrete starting point to examine human cultures in postmodern thought. Although I agree with Boyle's notion of the embodied Qur'an mirroring the dichotomy of the physical as well as social body, her theory is not strong enough to illuminate the complex individual mind/body dualism. Instead, I turn to contemporary theories of religious expression and materiality in the field of religious studies, because processes of religious meaning-making and religious materiality might offer more insight into individual mind/body dichotomy.

2.3 Materialising Religion: Religious Expression

Religion can touch people's invisible wounds (Dubisch, 2004) such as emotional suffering, personal traumas and intimate loss. When emotional pain or suffering destroys an individual's capacity to communicate with support systems such as family and friends, many find comfort in religion and materialise these emotions through religious practice (Notermans, 2007). In Christianity, Hinduism and Islam sacred texts are the prime connection to God. Sacred texts of the Qur'an are seen as the most intimate, close and direct connection to God that faithful Muslims can turn to. If we pay attention to Qur'anic recitation practices as actually lived and experienced by many *ordinary* Muslims,⁸ we will begin to understand the British

⁸ Nancy Ammerman (2007) refers to people not professionally trained in religion as ordinary practitioners.

Muslim religious landscape that is nurtured through globalisation, individual needs and desires far beyond traditional religious rulings and purposes.

Understanding the Embodiment of the Qur'an

Meredith McGuire addresses the question of mediation between the mind/body dichotomy through addressing material concerns and people's religious expressions engaged in their material bodies (McGuire, 2008). Body as well as mind constitute crucial parts of the religious expression evolving from sacred texts. Daniel Dehanas' (2013) study of young 'rappers' may support this claim as he indicates that the holistic practice of 'gospel rap' helps young Christian rappers establish religious authenticity through their embodied beliefs. As such, the body becomes more than just a mere medium; an essential part of religious expression. In other words, the material body engaged in religious meaning-making processes thus plays a central role in the overall experience of religion. Embodiment is also a crucial social factor in the complexity of the human experience such as race and gender. Using the example of the social construction of gender, Dwyer (1999) noted that 'femininities and masculinities are embodied, negotiated and performed in and through different spaces [...] and within particular social, cultural and economic situations' (p.136). To understand the social complexity of gender, we then need to understand the performance of it within particular parameters, such as social space and social relationships. This also applies to the embodied practice of religion. To study the embodied practice of the Qur'an, social parameters of everyday contexts of Qur'anic practice need to be considered; where someone will engage with the Qur'an and more importantly - where not and why, as well as social relationships, i.e. with whom they will discuss and share information. This information is vital research data, as these influences are socially constructed.

Materialisation of the Qur'an

An important part of embodied religion is material objects. Religion and religious material are often closely intertwined (Meyer, 2008) and 'given high importance [...] to fulfil religious ends' (Notermans and Kommers, 2013 p.616). Material itself is not meaningful; the meaning-making processes that determine the

religious value people give to material are. This stems not 'from the way people deal with [material] to mediate the relationships between believers and the divine' (Notermans and Kommers, 2013 p.621) cf. (McDannel, 1995). In other words, religion is a network of relationships between heaven and earth (Orsi, 2005). Therefore, 'no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function [...they are...] always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms' (Frow, 1995 p.145). These transformative sensational forms of religion are important aspects of religious expression because the 'incarnation of the divine in materiality and corporeality confers extraordinary significance on the body' (Taylor, 1997 p.89). Arweck and Keenan (2006) observe that 'the body [...] is 'worked on' in innumerable ways from hidden tattoos of cult identity to public liturgies of church belonging' (p.8) and 'heavily tailored by the prevailing norms and counter-norms of religious (re)presentation' (p.9). If we are to understand the religious expression of the Qur'an, we need to study these material processes. My aim is therefore not to discuss theological or spiritual justifications of Qur'anic practices but to address various processes of individual meaning-making of Qur'anic material culture. As Douglas Davies notes, the 'range of possible materialisations of religion continues to expand' (foreword in Arweck and Kennan 2006, p.xv) and faith may manifest itself 'in an infinite variety of material forms' (ibid. p.1) engaging every generation, social class and nation. Recognising and documenting these processes will add to our understanding of Muslim populations in the West. It is through the materialization or religious expression of their faith that they 'put their cultural distinction on the religious map' (ibid.) in contemporary society.

3.0 Methodology and Research Design

This chapter describes the epistemological, ontological and methodological considerations that shaped the project. It is divided into three parts. First addressing important aspects of the research context with British Muslims, secondly documenting the actual research design and thirdly an evolving methodological discussion. My hope is to demonstrate academic integrity by making the entire research process as explicit and transparent as possible, which led to my subsequent research findings. I also offer a small, timely contribution to the growing body of methodological writing on research with British Muslims. To this end I will discuss my innovative approach to the ethical representation and display of research findings.

3.1 Research Context

As public tension has reached a new extreme in a post 9/11 and 7/7 climate, 'faith is never disenfranchised from political pressures' (Bolognani, 2007 p.279). The field of British Muslim studies is 'a highly charged political, cultural and social research arena' (Abbas, 2010 p.123). The subject of the Muslim is 'never too far away from notions of immigrant, violent offender or the terrorist' (ibid., p.132). Given this contemporary era of 'local-global conflicts and crises, Islamophobia and hotly contested Muslim claims to speak in the name of Islam [...] anthropological and ethnographic agendas have an invaluable contribution to make' (McLoughlin, 2007 p.275) to challenge the public hype and stereotypical representation of Muslims. Questions of power and representation in anthropological and sociological research will require careful consideration in this contested and often problematized research environment.

Researching Religious Experience

Anthropologists with an interest in religious experience found that this domain can pose particularly complex challenges for researchers. It is of interest

because it 'evoke[s] stories revealing important religious meanings' (Notermans and Kommers, 2013 p.608). Profound human emotions such as devotional feelings and private suffering, however, can make it difficult for research participants to express themselves verbally, much less in conventional interview settings. This poses some epistemological as well as methodological challenges, which need addressing in order to build an ontological foundation for my research design.

Epistemological Challenges: Religious Experience as 'Linguistic Vehicle'

Conventional research methods are often limited because of the 'fundamental fact' (Yamane (2000p.175) that experiences are a 'wholly private, individual affair inaccessible to any currently known methods of social scientific research' (p.174). Turner's (1986) distinction between *experiencing* and the *experience* assists in addressing the problem of gaining access to religious experience. Indeed, *experiencing* is inaccessible for socio-scientific research because it is 'at a constant temporal flow from the standpoint of an individual' (Yamane, 2000 p.174). An isolated *experience*, however, is an 'intersubjective articulation' (Bruner, 1986 p.6) which provides potential for a reflective, linguistic account on *experiencing*. Hence linguistic representation is retrospective and reflective due to 'the imposition of order upon experience [...] by imposing differentiation and structure upon the on-going flux' of it (Berger, 1969 p.20). These narrative accounts, however, will depend on 'subjective meaning, including the spatio-temporal world' (Schutz, 1932 p.45). Physical, mental and environmental constituents embedded in real time and place are therefore important factors and meaning-making processes can never be objective. Katz (1978, 1983) showed that experiences are mediated and 'transformed before and after the fact' (Neitz and Spickard, 1990 p.25). Meditation stems from social factors such as upbringing, culture and belief. It has been documented at length that religions commonly function as 'cultural systems' shaping these social factors and help structuring peoples' experiences (Bellah, 1970, Geertz, 1973, Proudfoot, 1980, Stromberg, 1994). In other words, religion gives people the means of narration because of 'existing social or cultural structures [which] predispose us to experience certain emotions, sensations and bodily states' (Yamane

2000, p.176). Embedded in social context, these narratives offer ‘the deep meanings in human life’ of the stories people tell (Kouritzin et al., 2009 p.193) and become a ‘linguistic vehicle’ (Yamane, 2000: p.183) through which people configure, reconfigure and interpret *experiencing*. Socio-scientific interest in religious experience is therefore not concerned with phenomenological descriptions or theological justifications of religious experience, but focuses on how religious experiences are constructed as meaningful within a complex sociological context.

The interface of these social contexts and their influence on the social world people inhabit (Poloma, 1995) not only involves cognition but is connected to feelings, expectations and bodily states (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). The meanings people assign to religious experiences based on sensational experience can therefore present themselves to us in various ways, such as linguistic expressions as well as images and impressions (Fernandez, 1986). For the purpose of this study, however, I will predominantly concentrate on narrative accounts. Empirical enquiry about the experience of the Qur’an, like many other contemporary sociological phenomena, presents boundaries that ‘are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 2009 p.18) within its real-world contexts. I am therefore likely to require data production from multiple sources to address these complex social processes.

Methodological challenges and Creative Solutions

Academics have assessed severe methodological limitations in the sociology of religion, and in particular the study of religious experience. The restriction to conventional methods can be inadequate to facilitate the study of religious experience (Yamane, 2000). As Davies and Spencer (2010) note, we need to open ‘new doors to the pertinence of affectivity and emotion in the field’ (p.12). *Ad hoc* solutions appropriate for those peculiar research contexts (Notermans and Kommers, 2013) are required to create innovative context-dependent methods. One way to develop our methods is to give more consideration to the actual practice of anthropological fieldwork (Castaneda, 2006).

As Ross et al.'s (2009) research with young people shows it can be helpful to explore sensitive topics in a 'context through which intimacies can be interwoven within narratives of the mundane ordinariness of the everyday' (ibid., p.605). Going for a walk in the neighbourhood allowed them to generate research environments, which enabled encounters and exchanges of meaningful understandings of young people's everyday lives. Mobile methods opened up 'an assemblage of fragmented narratives [...] set within the wider context of everyday talk of the near and present' (Ross et al., 2009 p.606). Other researchers from numerous disciplinary and theoretical traditions also turn increasingly to multimodal research 'in their endeavours to understand everyday communication and interaction in social life' (Dicks et al., 2011 p.227). What is noteworthy about multimodal data, is that data is not generated only through linguistic stimuli, i.e. by posing questions in interviews, but embraces the complexity of a range of other communicative resources such as images, documents and sounds present. Although the focus on non-linguistic features, materials, objects, images and sounds is not new to ethnography (Dicks et al. 2011), these features now receive more recognition (see Dicks et al. 2006). We are more aware of the 'complexity [...] grounded in the diverse modes of everyday life' (Atkinson et al., 2008p.3). Postmodern analysis of social and cultural life requires 'proper regard to the many modalities of action and organisation, sensory, discursive, spatial, temporal and material' (ibid., p.2). A possible solution could be 'combinations of interview, participatory action research and ethnography [...] to analyse the[se] processes' (Harvey, 2011 p.666).

Researching British Muslims

Developments of public Muslim identities in Britain as well as changing images of Muslim self-understanding in the last few decades 'reflect the experiences and expectations of [research participants and researchers]' (Bectovic, 2011 p.1120). Researchers report a general fear of the misrepresentation of Islam in socio-scientific study (Spalek, 2005) which translates into the elusive pressure of having to represent a homogenous Muslim community (Bolognani (2007). Research participants often feel the need to balance 'the many ways of being Muslim' (Bectovic, 2011 p.1129) in

accordance with the expectations of surrounding communities (Muslim and non-Muslim alike). Particularly prominent is the misconception of demonstrating 'Muslim identity in the singular' (Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002 p.305). If we are to conduct further research with British Muslims we need to address the political pressure surrounding Muslim identity in our methodological considerations and find creative solutions for our methodological practice.

Ethnography and in-depth interview techniques have become the main qualitative methods for research with Muslim communities in the last two decades (see Marranci (2008), Bolognani (2007). Innovative concepts of ethical representation and display of data to address the political pressure of Muslim identity is therefore crucial. To date, there is relatively little methodological literature available. The small body of literature that emerged in the last decade has begun to reflect critically on some of the implications of qualitative research methods such as the body, researcher positionality and access (see for example McLoughlin, 2000, Bolognani, 2007, Khan et al., 2012, Gilliat-Ray, 2010, Quraishi, 2008, Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry, 2004, Zubair et al., 2012). To make a small contribution to this significant body of literature my methodology section will be extensive. Throughout, I will explain and discuss my research methodology with particular reference to the ethics of representing and displaying research data. My hope is that some of my strategic decisions and reflections will be of benefit to other researchers.

Research Strategy

My aim was to utilise the potential of close cooperation between researchers and research participants (Svensson, 2002, Akerstroem and Brunnberg, 2012) in my research design. I see the outcome of this study as a result of the communication and social interaction between Rabya and me. Rabya became a *co-researcher* (Finlay, 2002a p.218) as we both stimulated interactions (Swanborn, 2010). For their research with young people, Akerstroem and Brunnberg (2012) altered power dynamics in their research relationships by implementing three phases with varying influence and control executed by both researcher and participants. This proved to

be beneficial, as the multi-faceted approach allowed for a richer understanding (Mayall, 2002) by making the ‘theoretical outcome of this joint learning’ (Svensson et al., 2007 p.234) more explicit. I wanted to break free from one-sided stimuli for potential interaction and communication and give Rabya a greater means to contribute to the study. The idea was to modify power relations throughout the study by co-constructing some aspects of the data collection processes as well as dissemination of research findings. Rabya for instance executed a great amount of influence over the interview, because it was to a great extent based on her diary entries. I will reflect on these processes in more detail, but for now I will present my actual research design.

3.2 Research Design

Due to established conventions of displaying research findings, a vital part of research projects such as epistemological and methodological processes often go unnoticed. As Gilliat-Ray (2013) notes, raw data pieces such as fieldnotes, interview transcripts and coding processes are usually unavailable to the reader who is expected to rely solely on the written end product. This requires a high level of trust in the academic integrity of the researcher. The aim of this section is therefore to make my research process as transparent and explicit as possible. Subsequently I will systematically guide the reader through the individual steps of the project.

Epistemological Rationale for Case Study

Given the complex nature of the study of the religious experience in combination with a three-month time limit, I made a strategical choice to concentrate on just one young woman. Producing an in-depth, holistic account of the role of the Qur’an in a student’s life seemed the most likely to generate interesting findings (Thomas et al. 2007). Studying Rabya’s social processes of religious meaning-making, in particular her thoughts, values, expectations, motives, opinions and experiences as well as attitudes and behaviours required me to first develop a more general sense of them. The focus on one student quickly became a defining characteristic of the study (Denscombe, 2010). I needed to ‘discover the

world as seen by participants in the system [...] to [be able to] explain why they see it this way' (Swanborn, 2010 p.26). With a personal phenomenon such as religious experience 'the general (cultural and discursive resources and constraints) is not fully evident to us in advance, we know the general fully only through its [particular] embodiments' (Chase, 1995 p.20). Furthermore, the narrative approach of linguistic reflections was also in favour of case-based analysis as it allowed for a more variegated set of tools to capture the complexity of social behaviour (see Brady and Collier, 2004). In this instance, in-depth, holistic knowledge of an individual example was 'more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples' (Gerring, 2007 p.1).

Arguably, a single narrative case study 'can only yield a multitude of understandings of particular individual lives with no general import' (Yamane, 2000 p.186). The empirical data stemming from my observations is, however, valuable on its own, and does not seek to be transferable to the general. Instead, this case study illustrates the complicated relationship between particular experiences and peoples' interpretative reconstructions. The study explores a set of relationships of 'why acts, events, structures and thoughts occur' (Sutton and Staw, 1995 p.378) and should by no means be considered with the formality of social-scientific grand theory. It might, however, indicate valuable insights into the kinds of narratives 'that are possible for certain groups of people [if] we learn about the cultural world that makes their particular narrative possible, and problematic in certain ways' (Chase 1995: p.20), resting on the micro-macro link in social behaviour (Alexander et al., 1987).

Research Methods

Initially I made plans to observe young peoples' Qur'anic reading and recitation practices. After learning more about the complex nature of the study of religious experience, however, I realized that 'simply being there' was unlikely to facilitate access nor understanding of religious experience in a post-structuralist research account (Britzman, 2000). Hence I replaced the mono-method approach in

favour of the diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). Elsewhere, diary-interview methodology has already been named as a reasonable alternative to participant observation (Spowart and Nairn, 2014) and was chosen because it offers more flexible and multi-faceted means to study religious experiences of the Qur'an. As Eriksen (1995) notes, anthropologists often depend on a combination of formal and unstructured methods which can be a combination of interviews, surveys and focus groups as well as ethnographic fieldwork (Nilan, 2002). Another useful factor was that numerous methods would allow various discourses of control (ibid.). Furthermore, the combination of qualitative methods would constitute a valuable tool to investigate social structures and human agency (Goodman, 1998) in the research relationship.

Data collection

Rabya and I conducted empirical research for three months from May until July 2014. My time in the field was divided in four different phases of data gathering.

1. Research Diary and Fieldnotes

I kept a research diary to record and revisit my own thinking as well as to be able to trace the experience of researching. This allowed me to see how my interpretation processes developed over time. I also systematically wrote fieldnotes of any encounter with Rabya; every conversation on the mobile phone application 'WhatsApp', Facebook, or in person. I documented descriptive accounts of our interactions; what we talked about, what we did, and in particular any comments, stories and anecdotes Rabya told me about her life. It was important to do so as 'descriptive writing embodies and reflects particular purposes and commitments [...] involves active processes of interpretation and sense-making' (Emerson et al., 2001 p.353). Field notes are, however, inevitably selective and need to be made explicit as an influential shaping force of research findings (see for example Atkinson (1992), Sanjek (1990)).

2. Diary keeping

Rabya agreed to keep a diary to record her Qur'anic experiences from 8 June 2014 until 8 July 2014. To ensure ethical conduct, we established clear guidelines about the recording practice and the kind of information I was asking for (Alaszewski, 2006). We developed a system that would ensure a comfortable research environment for both of us. To do so, we discussed content and form of recording; she would note the date, time and particular part of the Qur'an she was listening to. Additionally, to the extent that she felt able to do so, she would take notes about her particular feelings during that time, her reasons to listen to this particular passage and any other comments she deemed relevant.

Rabya was offered multiple methods of doing this, such as keeping an online blog (see Hookway, 2008) or an oral diary (see Scourfield et al. (2013). She preferred a handwritten journal. I asked her to write her entries as close as possible to the actual event, either beforehand or directly afterwards (see Spowart and Nairn, 2014).

Rabya wrote the diary in the privacy of her own home without the researcher being physically present. Initially I estimated for two weeks, but after a review meeting at the end of the first week we agreed on a period of four weeks to collect more information. During the review we discussed and further clarified the process. I had a brief look at her entries and encouraged her to write down as much information as possible, to be less selective and to record as much as she could. After Rabya completed the diary I collected the entries from her. I then used these entries as a resource to incorporate 'aspects of the [participant's] experience [...] into the research encounter' (Thomson and Holland, 2005 p.214). Consequently, the combination of my literature review and the information she had provided in the diary, as well as any other relevant information from my fieldnotes were used to produce an *interview guide* (Bernard, 2011 p.158).

3. Interview

I conducted a two hour semi-structured interview (Bernard, 2011) with Rabya who chose to be interviewed at the graduate centre at Cardiff University. The interview was recorded and transcribed for ethical reasons as well as a means to facilitate data

analysis. The interview structure was based on Roulston et al.'s (2003) article on ethically sound interview research.⁹ At the beginning of the interview I presented my observations of Rabya's diary and gave her a chance to elucidate, remove or include more information. On the one hand this was important to ensure protection of Rabya's personal information (Kenten, 2010). On the other hand, however, this was also a useful way to spark the conversation.

4. Reflective Chat

Given that data gathering processes are co-constituted and a joint product of the researcher and participant, a concluding conversation was needed to reflect on the experience of being researched and researching. Shortly after the semi-structured interview Rabya and I therefore had a final conversation about the project. Although I recorded and transcribed this conversation I only had a few notes prepared to reflect on particular aspects of the project such as Rabya's various extents of control during the process. I was also hoping to improve Rabya's experience of being researched by giving her a chance to report and reflect upon her experience of being a research participant. The chat also had an ethical purpose, a means to formally conclude the fieldwork. Overall, this chat developed from an 'intellectual exercise into being of direct, practical use' (Finlay, 2002b p.220).

Data analysis

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) remind us that 'there is only interpretation [...] nothing speaks for itself' (p.500). As researchers we influence data creation by making choices about what to observe, question and record. Giving a short description of how I developed my findings from raw bulks of data is therefore needed because 'data do not speak to the person who gathered and reported them [and] are not likely to strike up a conversation with subsequent readers either' (Wolcott, 1994 pp.13-14). A first step to illuminate data analysis processes was

⁹ The article contains advice about helpful ways of asking questions, how to moderate and stir the conversation, and maintain ethical conduct.

therefore to make the database explicit (Manderson et al., 2006). My research diary also assisted to make the influence of environmental, biographical and psychological factors as explicit as possible (Broom et al., 2009). Given that interviews are interactively constructed by the researcher and the research participant (Garton and Copland, 2010), data is 'neither context- nor time-free' (Simons, 2009 p.148). What is said is 'inextricably tied to where it is said, how it is said, and to whom it is said' (Garton and Copland: p.533). This is because 'meaning is [...] is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004 p.141). Further attention will therefore be paid to the positionality of the researcher and the effects this may have on the 'generation' of data in the next section (see Baker, 2004 p.163, Sarangi, 2004, Rapley, 2001, Roulston et al., 2001).

Although data analysis naturally blurs the lines between description, analysis and interpretation, one should try to identify and distinguish among them (Wolcott, 1994). I have followed Henry Wolcott's three-stage guide to analysing data: an initial descriptive phase to organise data, a subsequent analysis phase to develop themes, and the final interpretation phase for report writing. The next chapter reflects this style of organising and presenting data: In 4.1, I present data on Rabya's Qur'anic practices, 4.2 gives a summary of emerging themes and in 4.3 I present a holistic account of my interpretation of my observations. I employed Wolcott's system to analyse diary content as well as the formal interview. I used the thematic approach (Ezzy, 2002) for the first phase of diary analysis to organise raw data. Codes to organise this descriptive data were frequency, time and purpose of using particular suras of the Qur'an. In order to develop these codes further in the second phase I scanned the data for other inducing themes (Ezzy, 2002), for example activities during recitation practice, reasons to use the Qur'an, management of emotions and time of use. I was able to identify connections or patterns between certain suras and Rabya's actions, feelings and reasons which comprised the raw material into more meaningful units (Punch, 2005). This enabled me to draw holistic observations about her choices of Qur'anic practices.

I applied the same principle for analysing the interview data. I used the same codes, which emerged from the diary data and additional inducing themes such as time, environment and body. I was then able to detect further patterns and connections on how she organised her daily life with the Qur'an, which eventually led me to produce findings of the meaning of the Qur'an in her life. Fieldnotes and research diary information were included in this process as they informed the interview.

Ethical considerations

This research design is based on 'relational ethics' (Simons, 2009 p.97). Ethical considerations have been an important part of creating the design, as ethical conduct is a crucial part of every methodological decision. Hitherto ethical decisions have therefore been discussed *in-situ*. A few aspects, however, deserve specific mention as they might be of particular interest to other scholars conducting research with British Muslims. As Elwood and Martin (2000) note, a particular force that informs ethics and politics of data collection, knowledge formation and finding transmission are the power relations manifested in research relationships. This urges the need to examine 'the researcher-researched relationship in detail' (Howarth, 2002 p.21). Doing so will give an 'added layer of meaning in writing a portrayal' (Simons, 2009 p.105). As will be noticeable, most of my ethical considerations were somehow related to the distribution and flexible interchange of power in my research relationship with Rabya.

1. Confidentiality

Rabya's participation was based on *rolling informed consent* (Piper and Simons, 2005). Prior to beginning the fieldwork Rabya received an information sheet (see Appendix) that explained the research project and her involvement in it. She gave written consent (see Appendix), which she repeatedly confirmed orally during the individual stages of the project. At the beginning of each phase I informed her about the process to ensure that she was comfortable with the progress and knew exactly what to expect. Every effort was made to follow the Data Protection Act 1998; all digitally stored data such as field notes, interview transcripts, diary entries and other

files produced for this project were anonymised and are password-protected in a secure place.¹⁰ Although often considered standard practice in socio-anthropological study to protect research participants identity (see for example Corden and Sainsbury (2006), Wiles et al. (2008) I have used Rabya's actual name because she wished not to be given a pseudonym. As Guenther (2009) notes, names are an important part of presenting findings and qualitative researchers should 'address the implications of their decisions [...] for our relationships with respondents' (p.411). Prior to the interview we discussed over a cup of tea how she would want her data to be used (Wiles et al., 2008: p.425) and we agreed to keep most of her identifiable social markers such as age and ethnicity. While she felt very strongly about keeping her first name, we decided to protect her identity by not specifying her actual degree, or naming her relatives. This particular dialogue became a crucial opportunity to negotiate power in the research relationship and gave Rabya more influence to decide how I would represent her life in my study.

2. Research Relationship

It has been established that knowing someone, i.e. having some form of a relationship with a person 'has a significant effect on one's perception [...] and the ways in which you relate to this person' (Taylor, 2011 p.5). In other words, research relationships are never just a one-way process, and will have significant effects on interpretative outcomes. In order to not present 'the empirical research enterprise [as] unnecessarily mysterious' (Gilliat-Ray, 2013 p.1) a paragraph is needed to illuminate noteworthy aspects of my complex research relationship with Rabya to maintain my ethical and personal integrity as a researcher. Due to the fact that we were both postgraduate students living in university accommodation, we had had a friendly relationship prior to the project. Consistent and assiduous fieldnotes writing throughout the time of the research encounter was therefore essential. I consistently wrote up every occasion; be it a brief encounter on campus or the

¹⁰ The original, handwritten diary entries have been returned to Rabya after the interview and digitally stored copies do not have any identifiable information on them (such as name, address).

accommodation block or on social media via Facebook or 'WhatsApp'. This was in order to log and trace my sources of information and subsequent potential developments.

Another crucial aspect of maintaining an ethical research relationship was to end the research relationship appropriately. Although the research encounter has ended, my relationship with Rabya continues. We no longer live in university accommodation but, for example, make use of the same computer room on campus while I write my thesis. The final, informal reflective chat was therefore a strategic step to bring the research encounter and the research relationship to an official end. I stated clearly that this conversation completes my research and that I would like to remain friends. A definitive, and quite common result of the research encounter is that our relationship has grown 'beyond the parameters of the field' (Taylor, 2011 p.6) after we spent a significant amount of time together (see for example Coffey, 1999).

3. Ethical Representation and Display of Data

Given the private nature of Rabya's narrative, it was crucial to carefully consider the information I was given the more trust Rabya developed in me. In order to avoid unintentionally exploding some of the information revealed to me throughout these encounters it was important to revisit some of the information with Rabya. The first part of the interview was a chance to test my previous observations (from fieldnotes and the diary) and revisit her openness and potential vulnerability (Simons, 2009). I consider this re-visitation a positive and beneficial force of ethical practice.

Negotiating the 'complicated ethical compass of contemporary fieldwork' (Marcus, 1997 p.100) not only aided the interview process, and greatly enriched data analysis, it also contributed positively to Rabya's experience of being researched, as she was more aware and involved in my research processes.

3.3 Discussion

To conclude this chapter I will now concentrate on some aspects that designated the success of the research design. I have already argued that in a time

where Muslim identity is increasingly politicised and ethical representation/display of research findings is more crucial and contested than before, researchers must find creative ways to produce a study that benefits the research participants as well as the researcher. The following section therefore offers an insight into how I handled these pressing issues.¹¹

Power in Research Relationships

Research relationships are increasingly conceptualised through power relations (Kvale, 2006, Tanggaard, 2007). Power is understood as referring to the activities and means of the ways researchers can reciprocally control the situation or give control to participants. This deliberately influences ‘the other person’s actions and [subsequently] conversation’ (Vaehaesantanen and Saarinen, 2012 p.494). The point is to become more aware of activities that can be used to alter these power dimensions such as relational ethics as demonstrated in this project. The idea of making Rabya a co-researcher was instrumental in giving her more power. Traditionally, researchers are seen as having a superior power position as they set the stage and control the interview according to their research interests, i.e. they initiate the interview, pose the place, topic and questions and follow ups as well as closing the conversation. This presents the power dynamic in a research relationship as a one-way dialogue in which the role of the interviewer is to ask and the interviewee to answer (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). By giving Rabya more control over various aspects of the research power was ‘exercised and distributed diversely and situationally’ (Vaehaesantanen and Saarinen, 2012 p.493). I have already demonstrated various ways of how I modified the power dynamics in the research process (Markham and Couldry, 2007). In short these were letting her choose the research setting, giving her options for diary keeping as well as making her own decisions about important ethical and confidential aspects.

¹¹ Parts of this section will also be presented at the ‘Inside Out: Reflexivity and Methodology in Research with British Muslims’ Muslims in Britain Research Network conference on 10. September 2014. The paper is titled ‘Outside-Insider research: New Ways of negotiating power in research relationships with British Muslim Youth’

Researcher Positionality

An increasing number of researchers are considering the role of their own subjectivity in their work. This is a welcome development which adds ‘an important dimension to their studies’ (McLoughlin, 2000 p.187). We are increasingly aware that knowledge is negotiated between the observed and the observer. As the upcoming methodology conference in September 2014 by the Muslims in Britain Research Network and the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University shows, the nature of research relationships in relation to researcher positionality has become a significant methodological question. If we are to take a step back and reflect on research relationships, the situational power dynamics of the relationship and its influence on the production of holistic data offer room for advanced critical and methodological reflection.

Rabya seemed to have identified me as an *outside-insider* (Belur, 2014). Conducting successful research from such a position has been documented for quite some time (Brewer, 2000, Ellis and Bochner, 2000, Edwards, 2002, see Bennett, 2003, Hodgkinson, 2005, Sprague, 2005). Rabya supposedly perceived my ambivalent status (Abell et al., 2006) between insider (fellow student) and outsider (Non-Muslim) as someone who lived a life not entirely dissimilar to hers (as a postgraduate student from a country different to the one we are currently residing). Rabya recognised me as *empirically literate* (Roseneil, 1993) and repeatedly used expressions such as ‘you know what it’s like’ and ‘you know what I am talking about’, based on the shared experience of being female post-graduate students living in another culture. The fact that she is from Pakistan and that I am originally from Germany did not separate us. Instead being foreign in Britain supposedly created a sense of ‘togetherness’ despite some of our differences (Ikonen and Ojala, 2007, Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). Elsewhere it has been suggested that the Muslim background of the interviewers ‘helps creating a comfortable environment for the interviewees’ (FT, 2008 p.8). In this case, however, my non-Muslim background made me enough of an outsider in Rabya’s eyes to give her the confidence to talk to me. She reportedly would not share some of her stories with other Muslims due to fear of being judged for her spiritual and personal shortcomings. I was therefore expected to have a

deeper level of understanding of her situation afforded by my prior knowledge based on my own experience but at the same time remain removed enough from her Muslim identity to keep her comfortable.

It has been documented that establishing trust, credibility and rapport are central to developing research relationships (Sixsmith et al., 2003, Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007). To do this, social signifiers are used to stress communalities or similarities between both parties (Brar, 1992, Coffey, 1999, Papadopoulos and Lees, 2002) through 'strategic self-disclosure' (Abell et al., 2006 p.221). Many methodological accounts advertise strategic self-disclosure of potentially communal faith, ethnicity and spoken language (see for example Quraishi, 2008). Sean McLoughlin (2000), however, found a platform for productive research activity with young Muslims in Bradford despite their differences by spending time with them. He established trust, credibility and rapport through supposedly mundane, day-to-day interaction, which allowed the study to unfold. I believe this was the case in my project, too. Living in the same accommodation block permitted closer and, although unintentional, more regular contact which certainly benefited further establishment of rapport and trust between us.

Being able to establish rapport and trust is becoming increasingly important as it may determine whether one is able to conduct research or not. As Gilliat-Ray (2005p.25) notes in her account of being unable to conduct research with Deobandi dar ul-uloom, Philip Lewis' ability to speak Urdu would have been considered a greater asset in the process, while his identity as a doctoral researcher in religious studies was probably downplayed and implied to be less meaningful. Therefore, self-disclosure is a fluid tool that requires much negotiation and consideration. Various approaches and degrees of strategic self-disclosure may or may not be fruitful, as they rely 'on the presumption that the respondent will in fact interpret the interviewer's behaviour in this way' (Abell et al., 2006 p.221). Self-disclosure might therefore be insufficient to develop research relationships. McLoughlin was more or less 'hanging out' and casually chatting to the youth in Bradford and became a part of their everyday reality, which changed the power dimension of their relationship. Finding creative ways to establish rapport and trust with research participants might

therefore be aided by revisiting and altering power inequalities and the employment of relational ethics in our research relationships.

4.0 Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present research findings evolving from my observations. It has three sections. The first section will introduce the reader to Rabya and gives detailed descriptions of some of her particular Qur'anic practices. In the second section, I will propose my analysis of the role of the body, the environment and the materiality of the Qur'an in relation to the way in which they are embedded in Rabya's practices. The chapter will then offer concluding remarks of contemporary 'Qur'anic lifestyle' at university more broadly, and will draw on the importance of time in particular.

4.1 Rabya's Story

Rabya

'The Qur'an is the way of life, a complete book. It's the way a Muslim lives. The way, a Muslim should live life, an ideal Muslim, the way a Muslim is supposed to be. [...] My existence depends on it. I don't think I would be the person I am without the religion. Following Islam, it makes me who I am, it's my life.'

On a rather chilly day in late September I met Rabya for the first time as we had both just moved into the same postgraduate accommodation block. She had come join her sister in Wales that first gained a master's degree in law at Cardiff University and now permanently resides in Cardiff with her husband and three children. Upon her arrival from her home country of Pakistan at the age of 28, Rabya had gained a British undergraduate degree in Law by distance learning and spent four years working for a law practice. After visiting her sister several times she moved to Cardiff in the autumn of 2013 to complete a one-year postgraduate degree with Cardiff Law School. Upon arriving at Cardiff University, Rabya faced a number of significant life changes: embracing a new culture, new environment and adjusting to full time

studies. To keep up with her academic demands her life revolved around university. During term time, lectures, classes and necessary preparations for classes dominated her daily routines. The journey to successfully complete a postgraduate degree at a British university posed many challenges, personally as well as academically. Occasionally, this would push her to her limits. Research has shown that higher education institutions can be challenging environments (Kara, 2012, Siddiqui, 2007, Ahmad, 2007, Ahmad and Seddon, 2012) and Rabya described episodes of severe depression, insomnia and anxiety related to pressure to perform at university.¹² Despite the urge to give up her degree, Rabya persisted and found refuge in her faith. She has come to realize that she is *'nothing without Allah'* and describes the Qur'an as a major source of strength in overcoming her battles.

Like many contemporary Muslims (Leemhuis, 2006, el-Nawawy and Khamis, 2009, Bunt, 2009), Rabya predominantly accesses the Qur'an through technological devices (such as Qur'anic apps on her mobile phone and online, e.g. on YouTube or the 'Qur'an explorer').¹³ Rabya therefore participates in virtual environments as an extension of real communities, deriving religious value and meaning from these (Rheingold, 2000). She does not keep a physical copy of the Qur'an in her dorm. Like many Muslim children (Boyle, 2004) brought up in practicing families, she has memorized considerable portions of the Qur'an. Although she prefers the Qur'an in its textual form, according to her diary entries, physical texts are almost entirely absent in her daily practice. Qur'anic technology is therefore utilised as a major social actor (Wheeler, 2006) shaping her practice: her diary entry shows that her mobile phone is the primary medium to access the Qur'an. Research shows that mobile applications increasingly facilitate the means to practice religion (Campbell, 2013, Wagner, 2013, Bunt, 2000, Bunt, 2010, Leemhuis, 2006) which provide digitised versions of sacred texts for spiritual practices (Campbell, 2012). Rabya feels that *'it's easier, because I know it's with me all the time [...and...] my phone is useless*

¹² To date, however, Rabya has not consulted a doctor or counselling service and was not formally diagnosed with any mental health condition.

¹³ The Qur'an explorer is an online application offering a combination of recitation styles, Arabic texts of the Qur'an and various translations. See <http://www.quranexplorer.com/Quran/>

without the Qur'an app'. On an average day, Rabya spends approximately two to three hours throughout the day with these apps, mostly listening to the Qur'an early in the morning and in the evenings. For many young Muslims, inherited parental tradition is a main source of knowledge (Boyle, 2004, Graham, 1989, Cantwell Smith, 1993) and Rabya seeks guidance on proper Qur'anic practice in particular from her mother, who taught her *'everything [she] knows about religion'*. Her mother, in turn, relies on sources of Islamic knowledge from the hadiths and (Islamic) scholarly literature. Rabya trusts her mother's and extended family's advice, because it has *'been tested and endorsed by all'*. Rabya also selects Qur'anic passages according to her own preferences. For instance, when she installs a new 'Qur'an app' on her phone, she will pick a reciter whose voice suits her sensory needs; *'it has to be soothing and give [her] peace'*. She prefers lighter, very melodic voices, but does not adhere to a particular recitation style (Rasmussen, 2010, Nelson, 1985). Rabya was unable to name a particular style and seems to have little concern for *tajweed* regulations.¹⁴ What matters to her is that the sound is *'just very comforting, it [has to] give you this feeling'* that she describes as emotions of peace and comfort. Her choices seem to mainly depend on individual sensory preferences. The emotion evoked by the sound is important because God does not just speak to her through the actual words; the sound itself carries an important part of the message (Denny, 1989, Graham, 1987). It is the combination of the message and the sound that evoke the *'impact it creates in your heart or in your mind'*.

Believing in the Qur'an

'I feel like everything I do needs, like that's what the religion says, that everything you do starts and ends, like it has to begin with Allah, in his name.'

¹⁴ There are a range of regulating rules and codifications of the sounds believed to be part of divine command of recitation practices that are of utmost importance to many Muslims (Nelson 1985).

The centrality of God in the life of a Muslim (Hixon, 2003, McAuliffe, 2006, Von Denffer, 1994) includes a divine presence in student duties such as homework, preparing reading, and in particular sitting exams. The urge to please God and to go through the day with his blessing is often one of the first things on Rabya's mind in the morning. If she starts a day without remembering God, she often feels like the day did not go well because she forgot about God. As academic demands and her stress levels increased during term, remembering God and spending some time with his word became a crucial ritual to her. Islamic tradition sees great benefits of turning to the Qur'an in the morning (McAuliffe, 2006) and Rabya feels that there is *'this conviction [...] this assurance that every verse has that you turn to Allah and you basically leave it to him'*. In particular listening to 'Sura Al-Fatiha', the opening verse of the Qur'an and is of tremendous importance in Islamic tradition (Graham and Kermani, 2006), helps her to equip herself for the day. Rabya does not regularly observe the obligatory ritual prayers during term - the act of listening to the recitation becomes a form of prayer in itself (Cornell, 2007).

Qur'anic Practices

*'[Reading, reciting or listening], it doesn't matter, they are
all forms of prayer.'*

Although Qur'anic practices may greatly differ in form and intensity (Nelson, 1985, Gade, 2004, Graham and Kermani, 2006), all of them serve one purpose; facilitating devotional desires. Islam has a rich history of traditional practices such as Qur'anic memorization, recitation and *sama* that are incumbent on particular obligations, ritual duties, regulations and codes of practice (Yusuf, 2012, Ghazzali, 2004). There is, however, also an indefinite number of personal practices not captured in research (McGuire, 2008). This section portrays the unique and individual mix of traditional and more personal Qur'anic practice I observed during my time with Rabya. Coming from a practicing Muslim family, Rabya has a rich repertoire of traditional Qur'anic practices. To present an authentic research account, however, this chapter focuses solely on her activities during her time at university, which are predominantly of an

individual nature. I will discuss some of the Qur'anic strategies she employs on a daily basis in order to help her achieve at university, and in particular during exam revision.

Rabya described reading the Qur'an as her favourite way to worship. Before she came to university, she would read the entire Qur'an at least once a year throughout the holy month of Ramadan for religious merit (Blackwell, 2009). During Ramadan in 2014 she managed only to read the first *sipara* (one of the 30 parts of the Qur'an) at her sisters' house and this was the only time she actually read the Qur'an in the last twelve months. She mainly listened to the recitation of the Qur'an; picking suras according to her emotions and needs in a specific situation to receive '*the strength I want from Allah, or the comfort I need from him [...] or just to calm myself*'. On an almost daily basis she also recited some shorter suras which, like most Muslim children, she memorised as a child (Boyle, 2004). For instance, when she turns to her father for comfort during times of stress and anxiety, he will recommend particular suras, which she then needs to recite a certain amount of times to ease her situation. When academic stress and pressure reached its peak, she increased her *sama* practices significantly. When the stress left her in tears or unable to sleep, she would play a sura on her mobile phone or her laptop. Any passage of the Qur'an will suffice in this instance because of the general tremendous merit of the Qur'an (Nelson, 1985, Rasmussen, 2010). There were, however, also times when all of these practices became obsolete. In moments of her greatest emotional turmoil, Rabya will address God in her mother tongue Urdu, leaving any kind of established practices behind.

Particularly fascinating is Rabya's personal tweak on traditional *sama* practice. As a means to cope with emotionally difficult situations she will for example play 'Sura Al-Yasin' (Q 36) in the background while she is crying out to God. 'Sura Al-Yasin' is widely acknowledged and appreciated for its particular healing powers in most Muslim communities (Deuraseh and Tohar, 2007, Yusof, 2008), and Rabya utilises its healing power to enhance her individual prayer. Her hope is '*to get more of Allah*' because the additional sound creates an environment in which '*the message just*

goes on and on'. This is not only meant to bring her closer to God but also urges God *'to listen to me more, [because] I feel like if its playing Allah knows I need him more'*. This practice becomes *'an extra ticket to getting Allah closer to me'*. The sound of the Qur'an is also a part of her daily soundscape during day-to-day routine tasks. Supposedly mundane activities such as cleaning and getting ready are accompanied by the recitation, mostly a cluster of shorter suras. According to her diary, these activities are her most regular encounters with the Qur'an and account for a significant amount of time in her overall practice.

The *'need [for] a message from Allah'* grew significantly during the various examination phases of her degree. She performed specific Islamic rituals for her exam performances. On the morning of an exam she observed *fajr* (morning prayer) and makes *dua* specifically for the exam. At the beginning of the exam and sometimes during the exam she recited several short suras and 'blew' them onto her hands and exam sheets. Physically blowing the Qur'anic words directly on the exam sheet blesses *'everything, like you send blessings to the prophet [...] that's the most important thing. I need to bless the prophet, so that he blesses me through his known medium [the Qur'an]'*. Performing these rituals gives Rabya a sense of reassurance through declaring the centrality of God (McAuliffe, 2006, Hixon, 2003).

Difficult Emotions and the Qur'an

*'When you're kind of lost as to direction, it's like,
unconsciously, I turn to it [the Qur'an] - I just know that I need to'.*

As a full time student trying to achieve the best result possible, Rabya's days were filled with lectures, seminars, reading and homework. At times she felt overwhelmed and emotional, leading to situations *'when I am so upset that I need to listen [to the Qur'an]'*. When these moments arise Rabya will turn to the Qur'an for comfort and to be able to manage these emotions. This is because during these times of great distress, such as performance related anxiety or depression *'the Qur'an gives you strength and hope'*. A range of Non-Western sources report positive effects of the

Qur'an on mental health conditions such as overcoming depression (Kimiaee et al., 2012, Sooki et al., 2011, Ahadi et al., 2011). Rabya also described that the Qur'an affects her positively although the pain might not cease immediately. The pain is, however, transformed and *'will start making sense [as] you start getting a different perspective of [it]'*. A vital force of transformative power of the Qur'an seems to be the actual content of the words, the message that God transmits through the Qur'an (Cantwell Smith, 1993). 'Sura Al-Yasin' (Q 36), already illustrated for its particular healing powers, is a sura that Rabya will most likely turn to in these situations as it contains prayers of forgiveness and ease for hardships.¹⁵

Affective Dimension of the Qur'an

'Like if for instance I've had a very bad day and I am feeling torn emotionally and if I've been crying. I feel like the crying stops, the pain obviously doesn't go, but the crying stops'.

I have already demonstrated that Rabya longs for more than just the comfort of the sound of the Qur'an in emotionally torn states of mind. In times of emotional distress the Qur'anic message is a source of even greater comfort. Healing power of the Qur'an (Ahadi et al., 2011, Khan et al., 2010) comes through the direct words of God (Graham, 1989, Coward, 1988, Cantwell Smith, 1993). Listening to 'Sura Al-Yasin' (Q 36) offers means to give *'away everything [she] feels at that moment [...] everything is shifting from you to Allah to fix it'*. Although the source of her distress might not be resolved immediately, or at all, the words have an enduring effect. They lift the burden that weighs on her shoulders. During our interview, Rabya described this transformative process as experiencing an intense moment of holistic relaxation – mentally and physically because *'if you are mentally relaxed you are obviously going to be physically in tune with the mind'*. Relaxing to 'Sura Al-Yasin' (Q 36) means receiving mental as well as physical relief through Gods words. Charles

¹⁵ See <http://seekersguidance.org/ans-blog/2012/01/19/the-benefits-of-reciting-surah-yasin/>

Hirschkind (2006 p.72) notes a similar embodied Qur'anic state: *sakina*, a state of relaxation accomplished when one listens to the Qur'an or sermon tapes.

Another example is the 'blowing' of Qur'anic verses on her hands as well as on the exam sheets itself to bless the physical activity of writing an exam.¹⁶ This might be related to beliefs of the divine healing power of the Qur'an through the medium of breath (Keller, 1994). In the interview Rabya also talked about Qur'anic involvement in the nurture of children. To ease the process of feeding for the mother, as well as helping the child with digestion, Rabya and her family recite a short sura before they begin, as '*remembering Allah*' will have a positive effect on the child (Haneef, 1979, Ahmad, 2003). Yet another form of Qur'anic blessing is to blow suras directly at her family and friends. These Qur'anic blessing activities are very important to Rabya and she associates them with the comfort of her mother's practices: for instance, while she was still a pupil in Pakistan, her mother would lift up a physical copy of the Qur'an over her head and Rabya would receive its blessing as she would walk underneath it.

4.2 Observations

The body and the Qur'an

'I need to, like, to be clean, I need to be praying to Allah. I need to be doing a couple of things [...] before I actually get down to the [Qur'anic] verses.'

Rabya feels the need to 'be clean' and 'be praying' when she wants to read the Qur'an. To perform Qur'anic reading practices such reading the entire scripture during the 30 nights of Ramadan, Islamic purity rituals require careful considerations of her bodily state and actions (McAuliffe, 2006). The first obligation is to perform *wudu*, a ritual that gives her a ritually purified body (Douglas, 1966, Katz, 2012). Although ritual purity can be accomplished through *wudu* practice (Hafiz et al.,

¹⁶ Other blessing practices are for example reciting/reading particular verses which are then gently exhaled in the direction of a sick person (Gilliat-Ray et al., 2013)

2009), there are other components. Rabya also feels the need to *'wear clean clothes [...] clear my thoughts, and clear my head'*. Ritual purity is therefore a holistic embodied process. While Rabya describes a distinct need for holistic purity to be able to perform reading practices, the extent of spiritual, mental and physical ritual purity required for other Qur'anic activity is interchangeable. The least amount of ritual purity is required when Rabya listens to the Qur'an or recites portions of it from memory. Her only requirement is to *'start [the activity] with bismillah'*. Purification processes therefore depend on complex negotiations of meaning-making processes. Rabya decides how and to what extent she needs to show respect to God in various practices. Although the extent, i.e. the intensity and complexity of purification means may vary, the foundation of purification action remains the same; *'to give it respect in terms of how I am, physically, mentally and environment wise'*. It is worth noting that purification processes seem to be determined by the environment and therefore surpass sole body/mind dichotomy. I will now demonstrate why the environment is such a crucial factor and just as important to Rabya as controlling the state of her body and mind.

Environment and the Qur'an

'I can read it out loud, or I can read it [recite it] in my heart. [...] When I read it in my heart, it's just me, it's going to be inside me, directly connected to Allah, whereas when I am in an environment it's like the whole environment, including me, and there is Allah, and anybody around me - so anybody around me will be involved in some shape or form.'

Exposing the Qur'an to the environment is a delicate affair for Rabya. To subject the Qur'an to a particular place through its sound or her own voice requires careful consideration of the state of such a place, in particular in secular higher education institutions (Kara, 2012, Gilliat-Ray, 2000).

According to Rabya, there are two forces at work that may affect the Qur'an. The first one is an internal force; the state of her body and mind in a particular place, i. e. praying on a dirty carpet or being mentally preoccupied. The second force is external; the potential effects the actual physical environment might have on the Qur'an. Alteration and control of her environment is a crucial part of pleasing God. Deeming environments proper or improper is based on complex social processes of religious meaning-making of material states (Arweck and Keenan, 2006). To a great extent these are based on inherited cultural and religious understandings of how to honour and respect the Qur'an. A prominent example is to not put the Qur'an close to one's feet, a rule that Rabya's mother has emphasised throughout her life. Rabya will also not keep her phone close to her feet, as it is her main device of accessing the Qur'an (Bunt, 2010). During our interview, for instance, I asked Rabya if she would play a sura for me on her Qur'an app, but she felt uncomfortable doing it because *'there are no Muslims here'* and the Qur'an would be likely to go unappreciated. The graduate centre is an environment *'[un]clean for the message'*. At the time of our interview seemingly no other 'visible', i.e. easily identifiable Muslims were present and the Qur'an could not be subjected to an environment where *'nobody knows what it is about, nobody knows how to respect it, [...] I wouldn't want the message to go ignored'*. Rabya is therefore very hesitant to subject the Qur'an to the reality of many secular higher education institutions and feels to need to protect the Qur'an from unsuitable conditions. For this reason, Rabya will only listen to the recitation in the safe haven of her home, a private space over which she exerts more control.

Rabya is, however, aware that *'it [keeping purification rituals] is not that important, it's just how I want it to be'*. Rabya gave the example of getting stuck in the graduate centre, a secular, i.e. ritually impure environment, without a prayer mat or required *wudu* facilities available. She expresses the notion that religiously significant material objects such as prayer mats are negotiable; *'if I don't have a prayer mat, and I can't do anything about it and I need Allah, I don't think Allah is going to say 'oh but she didn't have a prayer mat'*. Therefore, although the environment can be a means of showing respect to the Qur'an and please God, these conditions are human-made

and can become redundant. While Rabya tries her best to perform traditionally required purification rituals; in times of need due to emotional distress or extraordinary circumstances such as lack of opportunity to perform, bodily states and performance are irrelevant. Like the creation of spiritual cleaning activities, this belief could be related to the Islamic concept of *niyah* (intension), as ‘any act or activity is marked as an act of worship’ (Rafiabadi, 2007 p.648) if it is done for the sake of God and with good intension.

The Qur’an, however, is not just passively subjected to environments; it also has power to actively influence and positively alter it (Madigan, 2001). When Rabya has trouble sleeping she sometimes feels a negative energy in her room. She will then put on ‘Sura Al-Baqarah’ (The Cow Q 2) while she is trying to go to sleep in the hope that *‘the energy is going to die’*. Rabya invented this practice based on her knowledge of the Islamic tradition to say a *prayer* in every part of your house.¹⁷ Similar to Catholic domestic house blessing practice,¹⁸ Rabya finds comforting the blessed state of her environment enhanced by the presence of the recitation. The room might change because *‘angels will come to me more’*, as angels ‘are the closest to God [and] enlighten us by illuminating that which is unseen’ (Cornell, 2007 p.35).

Materiality of the Qur’an

*‘This is my religion, and I understand it, and I give it the
kind of respect it deserves.’*

Rabya’s mobile phone has become of religious significance due to digitalised religion (Wagner, 2013, Campbell, 2013). Although her phone is a significant asset of her religious practice it requires much fewer purification rituals because *‘it’s just an app’*, demanding less respect than a physical copy of the Qur’an. As I have shown, Rabya has significantly altered the traditional Islamic ritual purification practices and adapts them in her own Qur’anic activity. Negotiating states of her body, mind and

¹⁷ See <http://www.farhathashmi.com/articles-section/seerah-and-sunnah/moving-into-a-new-house/> for a range of Islamic blessing practices

¹⁸ According to Catholic tradition a priest blesses the living space of a house with holy water after its inhabitants moved in.

environment are complex procedures and require a time commitment that Rabya feels unable to make during term time. She has found a way to embody the Qur'an with a minimised amount of effort and time commitment appropriate for devotional activity. Most purification rituals are obsolete with the app, but basic rules apply: *'I'm not intentionally disrespecting it'*. The device still carries the essence of the Qur'an (Campbell, 2013, Wagner, 2013, Bunt, 2009) and must be treated accordingly. Proper treatment of the materialisations of the Qur'an in its oral form necessitates the least number of purification processes. Based on her mothers' practice, Rabya feels that she can engage in other activities while the recitation is playing in the background. Cleaning acts for example are permissible as long as she is in the right state of heart and mind, because *'it is not like I am committing murder listening to it'*. Cleaning up her room then becomes a holistic process during which she *'clears [her] head for those twenty, twenty-five minutes [and] I would give myself exclusive time for Allah'*. Vacuuming the floor, tidying up the room, taking a shower, are physical components allowing her to embody the holistic process of transforming her entire self. Mind, body and environment are transformed to a state that allows her to respectfully be close to God and nurture the divine relationship while she listens to the recitation. The Islamic concept of *niyah* (Rafiabadi, 2007), her intention for performing this activity is therefore enough. Rabya transforms supposedly mundane activities such as cleaning her dorm room or taking a shower into meaningful, devotional time with God because it is just *'[her] and Allah'*.

4.3 Qur'anic Lifestyle

So far this chapter has illuminated a mix of traditional and individual Qur'anic practices in relation to spiritual, mental, physical as well as environmental dimensions. I have portrayed how Rabya has found creative ways to utilise the Qur'an to negotiate religious identity and agency in a secular higher education environment. It should be clear by now, that these processes and practices are particularly complex and highly dependent on socio-spatial factors. In the final part of this chapter I seek to examine some of these processes in further depth.

Negotiating Everyday Life

'People may not agree [with my practice] but I am not practicing it for the whole [world]. It's for me and it's something I do for Allah, not for my parents, not for my friends but for Allah. So, it's how I feel, and people may not agree, scholars may not agree, but that's for them.'

Particularly pivotal to Rabya's Qur'anic activity is the nature of her environment. Rabya subjected the Qur'an to a secular environment at university (Kara, 2012, Gilliat-Ray, 2000), which she feels has very little recognition or appreciation for it. Her concern for the Qur'an and her desire to be close to God inspired her to create individual Qur'anic activities. These are the result of complex individualization processes induced by her environment during which Rabya has located, combined and developed parts of Islamic tradition, inherited parental practice and new possibilities of digitalised religion (Campbell, 2013) which amount to a unique combination of Qur'anic activities. Rabya found the means for meaningful interaction with God by surpassing the boundaries of traditional devotional practice that would be improper on campus and incorporated God in her student life in ways which were not previously available (Bunt, 2000, Leemhuis, 2006). Digitalised religion was a crucial tool to employ and negotiate religious agency throughout her time at a secular institution. She found a way to incorporate and fit the Qur'an in a supposedly unsuitable environment. Another important factor besides the environment is the element of time.

Making time for the Qur'an

'When I don't have too much time, at least I've worshiped in its form, in a form that wasn't probably done in the past. [...] It's not the complete form of worship, but at least it's in my heart, I know I've done it.'

It should be clear by now that Rabya's primary Qur'anic activities are of oral nature. The sound of the Qur'an has become the primary way for her to connect to God because *'of the routine that I have. I don't have time. [...] In order to read the Qur'an I need to be at peace with myself, the routine can't be as crazy as it's been'*. The hectic and busy schedule of a student has often left Rabya feeling preoccupied spiritually, mentally and physically. For the most part she was unable to balance time-consuming traditional devotional acts while studying at the same time.¹⁹ As has been shown earlier, traditional practices demand the most purification rituals and amidst daily classes, exam preparation and day-to-day life Rabya felt that she was either too busy to indulge them or unable to fulfil Islamic requirements.²⁰ Instead, she indulged in meaningful alternative practices that bear the same rewards, because *'listening gives me peace as much as it would bring me peace by reading it'*. The flexibility and freedom of picking, for example, a cluster of shorter suras to listen to for *'ten minutes, or twenty minutes [are] enough for me to include Allah. Obviously he's always a part of my life but [by] listening to the Qur'an, I've, in a way, included him in my daily life'*. Feeling unable to perform the ritual prayers, her personal Qur'anic activities are a way to *'remember Allah, and Allah knows I think of him and I want to pray. [...] I'm listening to Allah and I've not forgotten him. I do it because I want to please Allah. Even if I can't do it physically, I can at least listen to him'*. I suggest that many of her devotional choices and acts are therefore a result of strategic life choices in response to the demands and reality of a secular university environment. She has negotiated religious agency in a way that would fit her new and adjusted lifestyle, which has led to a rich repertoire of Qur'anic activities suitable for her demanding religious lifestyle on a secular campus.

¹⁹ On an average day, Rabya spends six to eight hours on campus in lectures and seminars with additional hours needed for preparation, let alone time required for sleeping, eating and recreational activity.

²⁰ Although the law building on campus maintains a quiet room, which can be used for prayers, the facility is inadequate due to its time restrictions (opens one hour per day) and lack of ablution facilities.

5.0 Discussion

The aim of this chapter is to present a nuanced discussion using the Qur'an and practices associated with it as a focus. Although this dissertation offers rich data that relates to a range of debates such as religion on campus, religious lifestyles, embodying belief and Islamic spirituality, I will concentrate on female Muslim experience of higher education. This area has been chosen as it is marked by a relative dearth of literature. My hope is that my study will be a valuable addition to empower Muslim women in the field of British Muslim studies as it offers some useful insights into the complex social processes of being a young Muslim female negotiating day-to-day life in a secular higher education system. In order to achieve depth I will restrict my discussion to individual religiosity in the negotiation of religious identity and religious agency at university, which sheds light on an aspect of female Muslim identity that has mostly been neglected.

Setting the Scene: Muslim Youth Identity

Recent reports (Peace Direct Report, 2006, Ali, 2008) indicate religion as a crucial dimension of adolescent Muslims' identity formation processes, perhaps even the most important one (Tyrer and Ahmad, 2006). Self-identifying as Muslim is 'interwoven into all other issues and aspects of their lives' (Malik et al., 2007 p.8). Religion as an important marker of identity also carries significance in expressing an accurate sense of self in the public sphere (Report, 2006). A series of 'landmark events' (Anwar, 2003 p.60) fertilised public interest in how Muslims 'live, [what they] think and do' (Johansen and Spielhaus, 2012 p.82). This resulted in the loss of 'the secular privilege of being latent or private' (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012 p.3). Polarising public perception sees them as stigmatized folk devils, potential terrorists and rebels (Cohen, 2011, McDonald, 2011) or the idealized future of Muslim generations. Hence Muslim youth narratives vary greatly, as they 'face competing ideologies and divergent lifestyles' (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012 p.2). The religious dimension of identity politics has induced great change in the last three decades in Britain. Researchers also increasingly focus on the 'religious dimension of Muslim's identity' (Hussain, 2012 p.626); their beliefs, values and policy needs.

Muslim Students and Higher Education

In the twenty-first century, religion is recognised as a vital component of human welfare (Furness and Gilligan, 2010) and several legislation acts have been put into place to 'actively endorse the freedom of religious practice' (Jawad, 2012 p.559). An important step was for example the Equality Act of 2006, which prevents discrimination against anyone because of their religion in areas such as the workplace, provision of services and education (Furness and Gilligan, 2010). Nevertheless, research shows that some religious students still experience university as a challenging and even alienating environment (Clines, 2008, Fairweather, 2012, Catto, 2013). Due to public security concerns and their particular policy needs Muslim students are particularly affected. They face many difficulties in trying to negotiate religious characteristics in higher education institutions often ill-equipped to meet their needs (see Siddiqui, 2007), Kara (2012).²¹ Because many higher education institutes exemplify space which 'robustly implements secularism' (Kara, 2012 p.145), religion is pushed to the private domain which results in institutional 'non-recognition of the religious component of British Muslim identities' (ibid.).²² Dinham and Jones' (2012) research *de facto* shows very little genuine top-down engagement with religious students. Religious students at British universities are therefore likely to feel that 'their religious identity is taken into little, if no account' (Catto, 2013). The nature of many higher education institutions as distinctly secular environments has been identified as a great factor of the complex interplay of students negotiation of their own agency and identification processes in university life (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012).

²¹ In short, these are being subjected to Islamophobia, targeted government, police, academic and media attention (Catto 2013), as well as lack of or inadequate prayer facilities, inflexibility of timetables for prayer times and religious festivals, Islamic dietary requirements and appropriate communal space (Siddiqui 2007, Kara 2012)

²² Church-origin colleges and universities connected to the established Church such as Oxford, Cambridge and Durham are a different case.

Female Students

Images of Muslim women are part of the public discourse about Muslim identity in contemporary Britain. Especially female students are under particularly 'intense scrutiny' (Malik et al., 2007), as the alleged ban of the niqab by a London university following the London bombings in 2005 demonstrated (Al-Makhadi, 2005). The idea of female Muslim students as a potential threat also mirrors the experiences of many Muslim women enrolled at university.²³ Muslim girls are portrayed as trapped in patriarchal, oppressive systems that do not permit self-expression (Khanum, 1992) or perceived as rebels or tearaways (Ahmad, 2007, cf. Malik, 2005, Coleman, 2005, Tyrer and Ahmad, 2005); dislocated from their religion and culture (Bhopal, 1997). Research however shows that the reality of female students identities is much more complex (Siddiqui, 2007, Ahmad and Seddon, 2012). Research on female students illustrates the complexity of Muslim identity by recognising young women as academic achievers that gain empowering personal and social mobility (Ahmad, 2007) as well as a general growth of Muslim social capital (Modood, 2006). Although the available literature has done well in documenting a range of female student narratives, it cannot explain how these women operate them. How do they successfully negotiate their religious identity and employ individual agency in an environment that takes very little notice of the religious dimension?

Recognising individual practice as part of religious identity

Aside from policy concerns and socio-political indications we know very little about the 'actual lived socio-economic reality' (Baker and Jawad, 2012 p.590) of female students. Indeed, it seems that academic interests focus on the external, passive factors of female Muslim experience; how they are perceived in the socio-political context and are affected by it. Much of the available data seems to portray female Muslim students as a religious minority, often disempowered, isolated and

²³ Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) found that due to various extents of visible attire, Muslim female students that wear the *hijab* have been particular prone to direct discrimination, and many have been reported to feel deeply alienated and subjected to racist incidents among students as well as institutional discrimination.

rendered unable to negotiate religious agency, in an ill-equipped secular institution. Although it is certainly the case that inadequate policy conditions may prohibit the practice of some Islamic rituals, the individual, personal dimension of religion is a different case. The influence of personal and individual religious practice seems altogether neglected in these studies. It has been observed that individual religiosity and spirituality do not necessarily resemble official religious tradition, and that an individual's religious worlds are not necessarily linked to the particular religious tradition (McGuire, 2007). This case study, however, indicates that the reality of a secular environment can further fuel the importance of individual practice, which indeed greatly influences the nature of religious agency. Although at an individual level, religion is rarely static and religious narratives are 'always changing, adapting and growing' (McGuire, 2008 p.12) these processes are often related to social norms embedded in the environment. Indeed, social factors are instrumental in establishing practices by which religious action is embodied (Ammerman, 2007). In a secular environment female students must find ways for their religion 'to make sense in one's everyday life [...] to accomplish some desired end' (McGuire, 2008). This case study gives a holistic account of a young Muslim woman that finds a way to create a space for meaningful religious and spiritual experiences amid the secular environment. She has found unique ways enabled through new possibilities of digitalised religious practice (Wagner, 2013, Campbell, 2013) to transform and create worship and prayer activities that enable her to embody religious agency on a secular campus. Her mobile phone has become a devotional device that enables her to autonomously practice Islam (Bunt, 2009, 2010, el-Nawawy and Khamis, 2009). Qur'anic activities such as her cleaning practice for spiritual relaxation have come to replace more formal, institutionalised forms of Islamic tradition such as Friday prayer. This shows that religious identity formation processes are much more complex than the influence of external, public and often visible, i.e. covering and dietary needs, markers of Muslim identity. The aim of this case study was not to produce a grand theory of individual practice but rather demonstrate the fluid and flexible dimension of personal, individual practice that forms an essential part of the formation of Muslim identity.

Negotiating Religious Identity in a Secular Environment

According to female Muslim students their time at a higher education institute provided opportunity to rationalise and consider their religious identities (Ahmad, 2001, Ahmad and Seddon, 2012). Gilliat-Ray (2000) suggested that the lack of institutional recognition of the religious dimension of Muslim students' identities might be one reason for students to become more aware of their own identities. If it is the case that secular environments inspire Muslim students to consider critically their identities, we also need to think about how this affects their daily lives. Furthermore, the ways in which their time at university influences their daily practice and religious identity must also be considered. Rabya recognises her experience as a student as having challenged and subsequently redefined her faith. During the course of her degree she implemented drastic changes to her religious practice; exemplified by a drastic shift from traditional Islamic practices such as Friday prayers to a unique mix of flexible Qur'anic activities. Subject to a secular higher institution environment, Rabya greatly adjusted her personal practice, whereby various supposedly mundane activities such as cleaning and showering were transformed into meaningful rituals. Rabya created an environment for herself in which she could embody and materialise the Qur'an in accordance to the environment she was subject to. One can therefore suggest that the way she operates religious agency and identity is simply adapted to suit her religious needs on campus. It is very likely that her personal practice will shift again, should she be exposed to an environment more suitable for Islamic practice (as was the case in her law office in Pakistan which facilitated adequate prayer and ablution facilities). Rabya's narrative thus indicates that identity formation processes entail a range of different dimensions that will create religious expression and the influence and power of personal, individual religiosity is not to be underestimated as 'not all Muslim women practice their faith in the same ways or to the same extent' (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012 p.21).

Defining a significantly diverse group of people in a one-dimensional prism would be unjust. This would certainly undervalue the diverse identities and complex agencies that they exert on a daily basis. Rabya's case shows that students find ways to execute religious agency according to the environment they are located in. We must take care to recognise the various extents of religious agency Muslim women will

employ depending on these socio-spatial factors. Taking into account how Muslim women, like Rabya, find ways to make space for their religion to negotiate religious identity in a purely secular environment helps to avoid disempowering and victimising representations and narratives of female students. Religious identities are fluid, flexible and operated by these young women with a wealth of intelligence, creativity and dedication. Reducing women to the visible aspects of their identities may leave them with a 'silent and disempowering narrative' (McLoughlin, 2007 p.2) making us blind to the complex and multi-layered nature of their religious identities.

6.0 Conclusion

This dissertation was set out to explore the role of the Qur'an in a young Muslim's life in the 21st century by means of applying contemporary theories of religious expression, materialisation and embodiment. It has sought to present a rich case study of individual Qur'anic activity in Rabya's life. I have drawn on a range of distinct bodies of literature to produce this study. To conclude this dissertation I wish to return to this literature in my final chapter and leave the reader with some final reflective comments.

Empirical findings

My empirical findings are chapter specific and were summarized in detail in Chapter 4. This section will synthesise my empirical findings in relation to my research agenda. Central questions were: where Rabya will engage Qur'anic practices, how she accesses the sacred texts of the Qur'an and why? I have shown that Rabya primarily practices her religion in the privacy of her room and that her mobile phone has become a major asset and dominant medium with which to access the Qur'an. During term time, the religious device (Campbell, 2012) almost entirely replaces traditional means of practice. The importance of digitised religion can therefore hardly be overemphasised. I have also found that the Qur'an in its textual form is almost entirely absent and her daily Qur'anic encounters evolve around its oral tradition. I investigated some of the major driving forces that shape her daily practice such as the body and time, and have identified social factors such as the influential role of her mother and extended family as well as her own sensory needs. In accordance with other empirical research (Kara, 2012, Gilliat-Ray, 2000) I was able to show that the nature of Rabya's preferred forms of Qur'anic activities is highly dependent on her environment. I suggested that the exposure to a secular space has induced a significant shift and alteration of her religious identity.

Based on these observations I have then argued that personal and individual practice is a crucial part of religious identity formation which characterised Rabya's everyday life at a contemporary British university. Studying the Qur'an through the theoretical

concept of religious expression, i.e. the materiality and embodiment of the Qur'an I believe has allowed me to portray the fascinating social interplay between individual Muslim subjectivity (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) and the wealth of new religious possibilities to practise Islam in contemporary Britain in the 21st century. Although this case study offers rich data about individual religious practice, Islamic spirituality and religion on campus, I concentrated on identity politics of young Muslims in my discussion. In doing so, I have pointed out the danger of essentialising and disempowering Muslim female students in academic representation and made a case for the wealth of women that successfully negotiate diverse, fluid and flexible religious identities beyond aspects typically documented in the academy of social policy, public perception and Islamophobic discourse (Siddiqui, 2007, Kara, 2012, Ahmad, 2007, Tyrer and Ahmad, 2006).

Negotiating everyday life and making time for the Qur'an

I have shown that Rabya negotiates religious practice in her everyday life by combining and developing traditional parts of Islamic practice and subjecting them to innovative and creative individualisation processes. Surpassing the boundaries of traditional devotional practice, digitised religion (Campbell, 2013, Wagner, 2013) has given her the means to employ and negotiate religious identity. Her mobile phone permits the possibility to incorporate and fit the Qur'an into a seemingly unsuitable secular environment. Most traditional, time-consuming practices do not conform to her lifestyle at university and were replaced by more flexible and individual forms of prayer. In this sense, supposedly mundane activity such as cleaning and showering were transformed into meaningful devotional acts, in addition to her repertoire of inherited traditional practices such as reciting suras herself and 'blowing' Qur'anic verses. Based on my analysis of Qur'anic embodiment I have argued that the very nature of religious practice at university is a fluid and complex concept framing Muslim identity. These are influenced by internal forces such as individual lifestyle, personal preference as well as external factors, i.e. cultural heritage and public space. It is very likely that Rabya's devotional choices and practices are a result of a strategic means to be able to continue a somewhat spiritual lifestyle on campus. In

fact, the significant shift to private, individual practice might be of temporary nature, should Rabya move to an environment more accustomed to traditional Islamic practice. It should, however, become clear throughout this thesis that younger generations of Muslims grow up in a time of significantly different opportunities in comparison to first and second generations. On the one hand, adolescent Muslims not only balance polarising public perception of Muslim communities in a post 9/11 climate. On the other hand, they also grow up in a society that offers new religious possibilities and means to execute personal meaningful spiritual and religious practice that transcends the boundaries of traditional Islamic practice.

This case study evidences the impact of the individual dimension of religious identity as a crucial part of identity formation processes. Rabya's innovative practices provided the means to negotiate religious identity and agency in a secular environment. My study shows that although some researchers (Catto, 2013, Dinham and Jones, 2012) are arguing that the secular nature and in particular the lack of recognition of Muslim student identity at many higher education institutions significantly marginalises Islamic practice by not taking Muslim religious identity into account, this is only partially true. Higher education environments might have a severe impact on some aspects of Muslim identity such as dietary requirements and facility needs, but *being Muslim* is more complex. Rabya is a young woman that finds creative and innovative ways to make space for spiritually and religiously meaningful divine interaction by utilising the Islamic concept of *niyah* (Rafiabadi, 2007) to on the one hand adjust as well as justify her current lifestyle as a postgraduate student.

Tying up the knot

Not uncommon in anthropological and ethnographic research, my research agenda gradually unfolded during the process of conducting the fieldwork. I started with a general interest in oral dimensions of the Qur'an and the role of its sound in Rabya's life. My findings strongly reflect the notion that sacred texts of the Qur'an can often be secondary to the strong tradition of oral practice (Cantwell Smith, 1993, Coward, 1988, Graham, 1987, 1989, Denny, 1989). As Rasmussen (2010), Gade (2004) and Nelson (1985) note, the sound itself does not only carry important

meaning, it is indeed an integral and essential part of Rabya's sense of culture and her religion. Oral tradition can hardly be overemphasised as a significant part of Rabya's daily life as the sound of the holy writ accompanies her throughout the day, even when she is sleeping, praying or cleaning.

In my literature review I have called for the widening of the scope of textual, ethno-musicological and socio-scientific research on the role of the Qur'an in Muslim societies. As scripture serves 'particular people at a particular time' (Cantwell Smith, 1993), in particular environments, there is a need for empirical data on embodied Qur'anic practices of Muslim communities permanently residing in Britain. We would diminish the complexity of the social world if we neglect the fact that although God speaks to his people through a seventh-century Arabic document (*ibid.*), the conversation takes place in contemporary, local socio-economic, spatial and political contexts. I have also argued that a sociological focus on scripture will require detailed examination of these social processes responsible for meaning making processes of identity formation and social status. The societal effects of embodied Qur'anic practice such as the authoritative status of female reciters in Indonesian society, as Anne Rasmussen documented, are an important reminder of the many facets of the transformative power of the Qur'an. While my dissertation focuses primarily on inward, personal practice and identity formation processes, there are other forces involved that need to be taken into consideration.

Scholars such as Gary Bunt have been documenting the potential significant and very real impact of digitised religion and Qur'anic practice through modern devices such as mobile phones and other applications (Wagner, 2013, Rheingold, 2000, Campbell, 2013) for over a decade now. Modern phenomena such as Qur'an reciter pop stars and media-related *fatwas* on the prohibition of using the Qur'an as mobile phone ringtones are important evidence to remind us that digitised religion may *de facto* surmount traditional devotional practice. The Qur'an is increasingly becoming a part of and deliberately incorporated into supposedly mundane, everyday life activity. Music-ethnologists Kristina Nelson and Anne Rasmussen also consistently note the powerful effects such as tears streaming down a reciter's face or the dynamics and

emotions of a crowd during a popular recitation. The impact and emotional reactions to these devotional encounters of the Qur'an are therefore present in the diverse bodies of literature, there is, however, very little available phenomenological information of these experiences. This case study is a humble first step towards understanding and capturing the impact the Qur'an may have on an individual far beyond spiritual and religious merit and wellbeing. An example particularly relevant to this case study is the healing power of the Qur'an for mental health care, which has long been recognised in non-Western research (Khan et al., 2010, Ebrahimi, 2003, Ahadi et al., 2011, Kimiaee et al., 2012, Sooki et al., 2011).

Direction of further research

The scale of studying the embodiment of the Qur'an and the social meaning of scripture is extensive and is, to date, virtually unexplored in Western societies. New possibilities of digitised religion indicate a wealth of Qur'anic activities in particular, and infinite possibilities of other Islamic practice in general, that are worth exploring since they began to appear in the literature in the last decade (Bunt, 2000, Hirschkind, 2006, Gale, 2004). Scholars such as Gary Bunt²⁴ and Daniel DeHanas²⁵ are beginning to build new bridges that might shed new light on contemporary, subjective religious practice (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Gary Bunt is currently working on a chapter on contemporary Islamic spirituality, which follows up from his earlier books (2000, 2009) and his observations about the religious experience as well as religious and spiritual merit found in digitalised experiences of Islam. In his paper about research with London youth at a local mosque Daniel DeHanas included his observations of what he calls 'everyday embodied micro-practices' such as saying *bismillah* or short prayers before one eats or enters a house as an important part of the way young Muslims embodying their religion. Although the presence of the Qur'an in many aspects of communal and

²⁴ This information is based on personal electronical communication about Qur'anic practices and spirituality online on 11 June 2014.

²⁵ DeHanas gave a paper on 'The Conditions of Belief in Inner City London Congregations' at the 'BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group Annual Conference "Religion and Power"' conference in Brighton 2-4 July 2014

personal life has been documented (Graham and Kermani, 2006, Hixon, 2003, Von Denffer, 1994) we seem to be more aware of the influence of these daily cultural and traditional practices. My hope is, that scholars will take note of the personal, day-to-day religious possibilities and interactions and use them as indicators contributing to our knowledge of Muslim communities in Britain. If we widen the scope of contemporary, often popular focus on belief, identity and integration (or lack thereof), we will be able to expand on and develop an even more nuanced understanding of our knowledge of the social reality of contemporary British Muslims.

Appendix



Authorisation Form and Information for Research Participant

Cardiff University
School of Religious & Theological Studies

CONSENT FORM FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT ON 'Daily practice of the Qur'an'

Name of Researcher: Sandra Maurer

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, to ask questions and have had any questions answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I agree to take part in the study.

☐
☐
☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent

Date

Signature

2 copies: 1 for participant and 1 for research file



Cardiff University
School of Religious & Theological Studies

Information Sheet for Research Participant
'Daily Practice of the Qur'an'

This information sheet invites you to participate in a research study. To help you decide whether or not you wish to take part, you may find it helpful to know what the research aims to achieve and what it will involve. I would be grateful if you would read the information below carefully. Please do not hesitate to ask if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

What is the purpose of the study?

- I am trying to learn more about young people's daily practice of religion. I am interested in your daily interaction and practice of the Qur'an and particularly in the ways you engage with oral traditions of the Qur'an. To do this, I will ask you to track your daily interaction with the Qur'an and interview you about your personal routines and practices in your daily life.
- The project aims to answer three questions:
 1. What are some of the ways oral traditions are adapted in a young persons' life?
 2. How might these decisions be influenced by for example age, gender, ethnicity and culture?
 3. Which sources of knowledge, authority and agency might inform these practices?

Why have I been chosen?

- You have been chosen to take part in the study because you are a young Muslim who regularly practices oral traditions of the Qur'an.

What do I have to do?

- I would first like you to keep a diary for me for one week. You will be asked to note when you engage with the Qur'an through for example listening to a recitation or performing prayers and which particular suras or parts of the Qur'an you choose, among other aspects (e.g. how you feel before and after).
- I would then like you to take part in an interview. The interview will last 80 minutes to about two hours. I will talk to you about your everyday experience of

the Qur'an based on your diary. The interview will be recorded and transcribed so that we will have an accurate record of what was said.

What will happen to the information about me that you gather?

- With your permission, I will transcribe the interview to keep a record of it. This will allow me to read what you've said again. If you like, this transcript will be available to you to read. This transcript will only be available to me and you.
- Additional, written notes made during the interview will be typed up as Microsoft Word files, which will only be available to me.
- I will change the names of yourself and everyone you mention. Nothing in the written outputs of my dissertation will allow identification of who you are.
- If you wish, I will give you a copy of the dissertation so that you can be sure that what I've written is accurate and that no-one in it can be identified by others.
- The data I gather will be held in password protected files, and kept securely in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- As a participant in the project, you can give as much or as little information as you wish.
- An analysis of the information I gather from you for the project will form part of my dissertation. If you request, I would be pleased to share my dissertation with you.

Do I have to take part?

- It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to participate you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You are also free to ask for more information before making a decision.

Who are the researchers and who is funding the project?

- The research is based in Cardiff University in the School of Religious & Theological Studies. The project is carried out by Master student Sandra Maurer.

Who has reviewed the research?

- The project has been reviewed by the Cardiff School of Religious and Theological Studies 'School Research Ethics Monitoring Group' which is subject to the procedures of the Cardiff School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee and my dissertation supervisor Professor Sophie Gilliat-Ray.

Contact information

- If you would like more information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Sandra Maurer, e-mail: maurers1@cardiff.ac.uk, Tel. 07514263882

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

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