



# Gathering for the Sake of Allah

## An Ethnographic Account of a Women's Halaqa Group in Cardiff, UK

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## Introduction

...the companions would sit around him in a semicircle (so that no one would be behind him). The assembly of learners was referred to as the *majlis* (council) or, more frequently, the *halaqah* (which means learning circle). (Boyle, 2004; 11)

As a necessary means of hearing the Qur'an, which of course had yet to be written down, the above quote taken from Helen Boyle's work on Quranic schools (2004) describes how the earliest *halaqat* (singular; '*halaqa*') in Islam began with the Prophet Mohammed and his companions. Initially taking place in mosques, *halaqat* operated as a "...principal form of schooling during the time of the Prophet and, after his death, during the time of his companions," (Boyle, 2004; 11) and continued as an important function of Islamic teaching and learning as the faith spread geographically in the centuries that followed. One of several strands of educational practice in a faith which places the acquisition and transmission of religious knowledge as central to practice, the history of the *halaqa* is very much entwined with the history of Islam itself. However, despite its relative near-constant presence in early Islam, or perhaps precisely because of this, with the exception of a handful of scholars (such as Boyle, Eickelman (1978) and Berkey (1992)) the *halaqa* remains largely unreported on as a feature of Islamic pedagogical history. Yet, the legacy of this method of teaching has remained largely intact across the centuries and *halaqat* still operate as important sites of Islamic learning in the lives of many Muslims across the globe today.

Modern expressions of *halaqat* are diverse and varied, taking place in a wide assortment of venues. Whilst some are held in mosques, others might take place in private homes, educational institutions, community settings and even in the virtual realms of the Internet<sup>1</sup>. There does not exist one universal *halaqa* curriculum (just as there does not exist one universal expression of Islamic belief or practice) and learning and teaching patterns can

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<sup>1</sup> The growth of 'virtual *halaqat*' is a subject in itself which could warrant entire new echelons of research.

be both formal and informal, tending to vary according to the perceived requirements of the particular group. Sometimes divided according to gender and age, *halaqat* can also be mixed-gender and multi-generational. In short therefore, there is no one defining feature that can adequately describe a modern-day *halaqa*, except that they facilitate the gathering of people for the purpose of Islamic study.

Just as historical accounts of *halaqat* appear to be scarce, available scholarship on their current state (particularly in those countries classed generally as ‘Western’) is also limited, with qualitative research on the topic even rarer. A few considerations of modern *halaqat* and Islamic study circles do however, stand out. Pnina Werbner’s (1990) in-depth study of Pakistanis in Manchester is perhaps one of the first to look at the role and function of such gatherings as examples of informal networks established by female Muslim migrants to Britain. Werbner briefly includes a consideration of an event akin to a *halaqa*; a ‘*khatam qur’an*’ (the practice of reading the entire *Qur’an* in one session), which took place in the homes of some of the Pakistani migrant women she formed acquaintances with during her research (see Werbner, 1990; pp.156-160). More recently, women’s *halaqa* groups in Britain have been the focus of Fazila Bhimji’s (2009)<sup>2</sup> research in the north-west of England, with specific focus on their role in the fostering and development of independence and agency amongst British Muslim women. Across the Channel, the journalist Naima Bouteldja’s work on political activity in the French *banlieues* published as a journal article (2009) documents interviews with a member of a women’s *halaqa* primarily concerned with grass-roots political action and women’s issues. All of the above contributions provided useful and important backgrounds to my own research and are mentioned to varying degrees throughout this work.

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<sup>2</sup> Although, it is important to note that Bhimji does not explicitly use the term ‘*halaqa*’ in her work, instead preferring the term ‘study circle’.

Whilst it was not my intention to explore such an aspect, the growing frequency with which *halaqat* are mentioned in studies concerned with radical Islamic reform movements, could not be discounted from this introduction. Increasingly it would seem, *halaqat* have received attention in studies concerned with the group Hizb ut-Tahrir (see for example Hairgrove and McCleod, 2008). A 2009 report published by the Centre for Social Cohesion, suggested that *halaqat* are the chief means by which groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir recruit and attract members, asserting that; "...HTB (Hizb ut-Tahrir)'s *halaqaat*...provide new recruits with a structured indoctrination of HT ideology in advance of party membership." (Ahmed and Stuart, 2009; 72).

In considering some of the available literature on *halaqat* in the 'West' then, even within such a small body of literature, a schism appears to have developed. On one side sit those accounts which consider some (mostly male-only) *halaqat* within current discourses of security and terror, resulting in the imagining of a dangerous, radical and threatening space. On the other side, sit the studies which have mostly dealt with women's *halaqat* groups in homes or community buildings and which present the *halaqa* as a safe and accessible space of friendship, learning and even active agency. One suspects however, that *halaqat* in modern Britain are not quite the simplistic affair that either polarised view implies.

The study that follows attempts to add to this fledgling body of work by presenting the results of a short period of research spent with a women's *halaqa* group located in Cardiff in 2010. Whilst I have tended to steer away from the use of the term 'findings', as this might imply my assuming a certain level of authority about what is an in-depth and complex subject, I have tried to present my encounters with the group as honestly and accurately as possible, in order to begin to address the gap in qualitatively-based studies of British *halaqa*

groups and to indicate what such groups might reveal in terms of the nature of ‘Islamic spaces’ in Britain today.

The first part of this work contains a review of the growing body of literature on the combined themes of Islam, space and gender. In providing a view of past scholarship on the subject and its future trajectories, I will attempt to indicate how research with a woman-only *halaqa* group in twenty-first century Cardiff arrives from this newly blended academic field and how it seeks to fill the noticeable absence of the *halaqa* in considerations of British ‘Islamic space’. Following the literature review, is a methodology section outlining the qualitative research methods and approaches I employed when conducting research with the *halaqa* group in question and also pausing briefly to consider the role of myself during the research.

The four chapters that follow are devoted to the research study itself. Chapter one aims to introduce the *halaqa* group and the voices of the women who so generously offered interviews. The second chapter attempts to consider an analysis of the space of the *halaqa* and the movement and management of bodies within it. Chapter three looks at the centrality of knowledge-exchange in the *halaqa*, focusing in particular on the nature of teaching and the learning that occur within it. Finally, the fourth chapter details the role of the *halaqa* in reinforcing Islamic ‘sisterhood’ and friendship, with reference to two case studies.

## Literature Review

Since the current body of literature concerned with *halaqat* in the UK is relatively small and one of the aims of this research is to consider what the *halaqa* might reveal about religious space in modern Britain, the background to this study was mainly informed by work that deals with ‘space’ and Islam in Britain. The use of both ‘space’ and ‘the spatial’ as “...exploratory and explanatory research construct(s)...” (Hopkins and Gale, 2009; 3) in research undertaken with British Muslims has slowly increased over the past two decades. This has occurred for the most part, in line with a more general swell of interest in space within the field of religious studies, at the helm of which is Knott’s seminal work *The Location of Religion* (2005), but also with the increasing levels of academic interest in the subject of Muslims and Islam in Britain more generally. Such interest has been generated in a wide-range of disciplines, including those where considerations of space are perhaps more traditional endeavours, such as geography (see for example, Aitchison *et al* 2007) and urban planning (Gale and Naylor 2002, Gale 2008). It would appear that literature concerned with British Muslims and ‘space’ tends to fall within two main sub-categories; the first includes studies which look at how British Muslims might situate themselves within those spaces inhabited by most people on an everyday basis, the second includes considerations of expressly ‘Islamic space’.

I begin then, by considering the scope of work concerned broadly with Muslims and the embodiment of Islam in ‘everyday’ spaces. Certain everyday spaces reoccur in such work, with explorations of sites such as the home (Phillips 2009), the labour market (Mohammad 2005, Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans 2009), leisure spaces (Scraton and Watson 1998, Green and Singleton 2007) and educational institutions (Dwyer and Shah 2009) to date, providing some of the spatial contexts for research with Muslims in Britain. In particular,

Muslim women have tended to form the focus of such studies. Indeed, the union of ‘gender, religion and space’ as a framework for thinking about modern expressions of Islam (and other religions) has emerged as a dynamic field, expanding enough to warrant whole volumes of work on the subject (see for example Falah and Nagel, 2005). Perhaps due to a combination of practical and political factors<sup>3</sup>, the use of the spatial as an approach in research with Muslim men in Britain, is rarer (as is research with Muslim men in general), but is beginning to receive increased consideration, as can be seen in work authored by Alexander (2000) and Dwyer *et al* (2008). In attempts to reclaim considerations of space from the normative (usually white, usually middle-class) masculine gaze, feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey (1994) and Adrienne Rich (1986) have argued that space begins with the personal, that is; the body. It is against this background, that writers such as Claire Dwyer (1999a) and Emma Tarlo (2007) have conducted qualitative research with Muslim women in Britain, examining the ways in which the personal and immediate space of the body (with particular reference to its decoration in recognisably ‘Islamic’ ways) is sometimes interpreted as a site of individual and collective identity creation and resistance.

Indeed, as a topic, the locating of British Muslim ‘identity/ies’ has attracted a large amount of attention in studies using the spatial as an approach. Gale and Hopkins’ (2009) edited collaboration brings together a selection of writings which consider the ways in which everyday spaces (and also the overtly sacred, as can be seen in McLoughlin’s contribution to this work) periodically act as sites of identity negotiation for British Muslims. I find the editors’ definition of space as a theme which “...encompass(es) the notions of site, place, scale, mobility, global and local,” (Hopkins and Gale 2009; 3) particularly useful as a way of

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<sup>3</sup> That accounts of research with Muslim women tend to outweigh those conducted with men is likely to be the result of the more frequent availability of Muslim women for research (a consideration speculated briefly upon by Gilliat-Ray 2010; 206) but may also be a response to the increased (often misguided or misinformed) visibility of Muslim women in the media.



thinking about space as being as necessarily flexible as the identities it might attempt to forge or contain.

In turning to a consideration of explicitly ‘Muslim spaces’ in Britain, we must first determine exactly what it is that constitutes such spaces. In one of the earliest works to attempt to address this topic, contributions to Barbara Daly Metcalf’s (1996) *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, are primarily concerned with religious space. As the editor explains, these are the spaces where Islam actually ‘happens’, or rather, where the “...individual and corporate recitation, display and transmission of sacred (Arabic) words...” (Metcalf 1996; 4) takes place. Chapters specific to the British context include work by Pnina Werbner and John Eade; with Werbner discussing the physical (and temporary) ‘claiming’ of Sufi space during a *julu* parade in the streets of Manchester<sup>4</sup> and Eade exploring some of the processes necessary for the ‘Islamization’ of space to occur in London. As work such as Eade’s and Werbner’s attempt to demonstrate, ‘Islamic space’ is fluid and adaptable and yet it’s creation in non-Muslim lands is not without (sometimes lengthy) periods of negotiation and occasionally, struggle. As the most conspicuous of Islamic religious spaces, the mosque in Britain has at various times, been considered in terms of its multi-functions (McLoughlin, 1998) and its potential as a site for women’s participation in the face of a heavily-gendered discourse surrounding terrorism and national security (Brown, 2008). As previously mentioned, with the exception of the aforementioned work by Werbner (1990, 1996b) and Bhimji (2009), very few academic accounts have so far considered those Islamic religious spaces in Britain which exist outside the mosque but which still conform to Metcalf’s definition of Islamic religious space.

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<sup>4</sup> This research is also considered in a journal article of the same title (Werbner, 1996b).

In considering both ‘Muslim space’ and the everyday spaces inhabited by Muslims, I feel it is also worth briefly mentioning the negative connotations that each category has, at times, attracted. Whilst the media clearly has some role in shaping considerations of certain Islamic spaces and Muslim bodies in everyday spaces as being ‘other’, government initiatives concerned with ‘cohesion’ and ‘assimilation’ have also (perhaps unintentionally), contributed to this. For example, in highlighting concerns about segregation and deprivation in the wake of the 2001 disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, a report led by the Community Cohesion Review Team (2001), could be seen to reinforce the image of the inner-city space as being central to ‘understanding’ and placing British Muslims (see 2001; 11 for a succinct example of this). More recently, initiatives resulting from the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ (PVE or ‘Prevent’) programme, where funding has been targeted at those considered to be ‘priority local areas’ (see Department for Communities and Local Government 2007: 14-15), again imply a link between certain ‘Muslim spaces’ (usually that of the inner-city youth club, *madrassa* or mosque) and a dangerous ‘Other’ which pose a threat to national security. Of course, given the potential and real severities of the events which resulted in the establishment of such initiatives, the (past<sup>5</sup>) government was required to take some level of action and yet, such reports appear to do much to demonise and even fictionalise the (mostly urban) spaces which might be inhabited by Muslims. These types of assumptions, whether clearly articulated or silently implied, have prompted scholars such as Deborah Phillips (2006) who presents qualitative work conducted with Muslims in Bradford which contests the claim that the majority of Muslims lead largely spatially-bound and religious and ethnically isolated lives. Work such as Phillips’, which seek to present an accurate and contemporary view of how British Muslims use and interpret space, act as

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<sup>5</sup> Although usually involving cross-party support and input, such programmes were developed under the Labour-led Government of 1997-2010 and it is yet to be seen whether they shall remain in place under the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government which came into power at the time of my writing.

important contributions to a reformulation of how certain ‘Muslim spaces’ are both created and perceived in popular and bureaucratic imaginations.

Arising from work such as Phillips’, I wish to propose that a third sub-category to those already mentioned might now also be added to work which considers the spatial as an approach to research with British Muslims. Beginning to emerge is a body of work largely concerned with demonstrating how the spatial can be interpreted as a source of empowerment, or of recovering a ‘lost’ sense of Muslim strength or identity. The recently published *Muslim Spaces of Hope: Geographies of Possibility in Britain and the West* (Phillips 2009) is perhaps a good example of work of this ilk; where certain ‘Islamic’ spaces such as the *hammam* (Sibley and Fadli 2009) are explored in order to demonstrate their power as spaces which can adapt, reinvent and resist certain ‘Western’ perceptions of Islamic identity. In presenting my own research with a women’s-only *halaqa* in modern Britain in the following pages, I hope to demonstrate how, at differing times, it spanned all of the sub-categories described above.

## **Methodology**

Considering research methods which would be both appropriate and sensitive to the context of the planned research took me on many an interesting theoretical and reflexive journey. Given that Islamic *halaqat* in Britain remain a largely under-explored, even hidden ‘social world’, I felt strongly that the depth of data required could only be facilitated through detailed discussion and frequent observation. Added to this, it was also unlikely that I would be dealing with large numbers of people or working across multiple sites to develop a comparison (although this might have been desirable had I not been working within such strict time and space constraints); situations in which quantitative methods such as questionnaires might have been more useful. Instead, my aim was to produce as rich, or ‘thick’, a description of a modern, British, women’s-only *halaqa* as possible. Hence, the combination of qualitative methods that I detail below were selected for their potential to achieve this objective to the fullest.

The existing body of work dedicated to qualitative research methods is vast and includes many excellent general textbooks (such as those authored by Tim May (1993), Jennifer Mason (1996) and David Silverman (1997, 2000)) which I found useful in beginning to develop a methodology. As useful as general texts on methods are however, it is usually only in those examples of research similar to that which you have envisioned, that any level of applicable guidance can be found. Aside from Werbner’s (1990) and Bhimji’s (2009) experiences, there were very few pre-existing methodologies with which to refer when approaching the research design stages of my own study. In many ways however, this was not entirely a disadvantage and in fact, the absence of a methodological ‘blueprint’ helped me to resist the urge to develop any preconceptions of the ‘field’ prior to starting. As a background guide to conducting the fieldwork component of this work then, I looked to

examples of qualitative studies conducted with other religious study groups and those where non-Muslims had set up (often long) periods of research with Muslims in Britain. These are mentioned with reference to specific methods throughout this chapter.

The structure, pattern, history and content of the particular *halaqa* I attended will be described in greater detail during the following chapters, furnished with the voices of those who attended. For now however, I wish to provide a brief overview of the *halaqa* in question, before providing an account of the qualitative methods employed during the research. The main body of this dissertation is developed from data ‘collected’ over a five week period in June and July 2010. After gaining ethical approval for this project from the University (a copy of which is included at the beginning of this project) I attended and observed six weekly meetings of a women-only *halaqa* group held in Cardiff and conducted semi-structured interviews with five of the women who attended. The *halaqa* in question took place on Wednesday mornings in a private family home and lasted, on average, for about an hour and a half. One week, I also attended an extra session held at the home of the ‘teacher’ because there had not been sufficient time to cover all the material at the regular meeting. Run in line with the school year, meetings usually take place during term-time and my attendance at the *halaqa* coincided with the last portion of the school summer term. Although I had not intentionally planned my presence to overlap with this particular time, I had initially felt that this would be advantageous in that it would provide a pre-determined ‘cut-off’ point for the completion of the fieldwork and would hopefully enable me to gather manageable amounts of data. However, ending the time I spent at the *halaqa* and ‘leaving the field’ turned out not to be the neat or straightforward processes I had planned, not least because of the social connections I was beginning to form. Similarly, employing the usual research terminology such as ‘field’, ‘gate-keeper’ and ‘informant’ did not sit easily with my research experiences as I increasingly found such terms to imply a somewhat cold and impersonal process. I realise

that this view is overshadowed by my own personal feelings towards the ‘field’ and those within it but, short of developing my own lexicon tailor-made to my research experiences, I have used such phrases sparingly and only when necessary.

Negotiating access to the *halaqa* was a multi-layered process which, although relatively smooth, was not without its minor hurdles. From the start, I worried about what attendees might think of someone coming in to ‘do research’ on what was an ordinary, but usually private, feature of their everyday lives and feared I would be rejected on the grounds that I was interfering. After all, why would someone who was not a Muslim, want to attend an Islamic religious meeting? This was exactly the sort of question which was, quite understandably, put to me by the host of the *halaqa*, ‘Mahira’, during her first phone call to me. Initially, I had been put in touch with someone with previous links to the University and who was known for running local *halaqa* groups. As it turned out, the person in question was no longer running this *halaqa*<sup>6</sup> but had asked Mahira (in whose house the *halaqa* took place) to contact me. In a sense, although I never met the initial ‘gatekeeper’, I acknowledge that her role was crucial to my establishing contact with Mahira (the second ‘gatekeeper’) who was eventually a key ‘informant’ throughout the research and also an interviewee, providing me with much important information about the history and background of the *halaqa*. Although not physically present, the first ‘gatekeeper’ was so highly regarded amongst members of the group and so entwined in its history, that the research contains references to her, rendering her (I hope) visible in the process.

After appearing to satisfy Mahira’s questions regarding the purpose of the research and where and how it would be made available (it was made quite clear that the group would not be comfortable with the findings being made available to the media, perhaps hinting at a

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<sup>6</sup> The rotating leadership of the *halaqa* is further detailed in chapter three.

deep mistrust of current reporting on Islam), it was agreed that she would seek permission from the group as a whole and get back to me. I was quite keen for the group to be made fully aware of who I was and what I would be doing from an ethical point of view, as I felt that everyone should be made aware of my presence and given the opportunity to object to it, prior to my arrival. I later discovered through interviews and observation at *halaqa* meetings that, although no-one had ever conducted research with the group before, members were used to welcoming new-comers and were also accustomed to accommodating interested non-Muslims, who sometimes attended to find out more about Islam. I was relieved therefore when the host contacted me to say that everyone was comfortable with me attending a few meetings and had even expressed interest in the research.

To varying degrees, access remained an ongoing process throughout the fieldwork. Aside from a few ‘core’ members who attended every meeting I was present at and whom I gradually understood to be regular and longstanding attendees, not everyone was able or willing to attend the *halaqa* as regularly and so, each meeting I attended was marked by the appearance of someone whom I had never seen before and, in some cases, would never see again. By sketching over the shifting nature of attendance at the *halaqa*, I do not wish to imply that some women were any more or less committed to the goals (i.e. the gaining and expanding of religious knowledge) of the *halaqa* than others, as it is certainly neither my intention nor my place to measure or critique such phenomena. I only seek to reinforce the fact that I was attending the *halaqa* for a very short period of time and so inevitably, there was an imbalance between the number of people I met and spoke with and the actual number of women who attended (and continue to attend) the *halaqa* on a rotating basis.

### **Participant Observation**

It becomes an analyst of his [sic.] time to go out and use his feet now and again. Strolling still has its uses. (Bauman 1992, cited in May 1993; 147).

As a qualitative method which allows the researcher to observe a group's multiple processes of meaning-making and social interactions first-hand, participant observation proved an invaluable research method during this particular piece of research. However, just as there were people who attended the *halaqa* with whom I did not have the chance to speak, I acknowledge that the 'being there and seeing' that participant observation demanded of me during the fieldwork, cannot account for all that I inevitably missed, was not a part of, or simply chose to overlook during the short time I spent with the *halaqa* group.

Although different in focus and context, I found both Myfanwy Franks' (2001) and Abby Day's (2005) experiences of participant observation with groups of Christian and Muslim women useful in providing backgrounds to my own approaches to participant observation. As a non-religious woman conducting research with Christian and Muslim women involved in religious revivalist movements in the 'West', Franks' claims that participant observation allowed her to; "...access data which would be outside the frame of a classic interview as a means of trying to ascertain the insiders' viewpoint," (2001; 57) resonated with the reasoning behind my own decisions to observe *halaqa* meetings. Whilst in my case, I was not as concerned with establishing *why* women attended *halaqat* but rather, *what happened* during meetings, as a method it appeared to ideally complement the process of interviewing.

In considering how to go about the actual process of observation prior to beginning research with the *halaqa* group, like Abby Day's (2005) experiences of a period of observation with a Christian women's prayer group in the north of England; "(m)y intention was to observe the group and then see what particular aspect of participants' group...behaviour might become my focus," (Day, 2005; 343). Approaching the fieldwork in



such a manner carries obvious risks (as Day acknowledges) and my adopting a similarly “...initially non-directional, more collaborative approach...” (*ibid.*) is not to suggest that I began the fieldwork haphazardly, but is to aim to place the participants at the centre of the research.

Of the more general offerings on participant observation, my opinion of the participant-observer role were also shaped by Gold’s (1958) definition of the ‘participant as observer’ which asserts that the observer’s intentions and presence be made clear to the group, encourages the development of relationships and where, essentially in my case, the assumed position is that of quiet observer as opposed to active participant (see Gold 1969, cited in May 1993: 155-156). However, whilst my experiences of participant observation with the *halaqa* group, largely involved; “...the interweaving of looking and listening...watching and asking,” (Lofland and Lofland 1971: 13), as time went on I often found I had less and less control over my ‘participant as observer’ role. For instance, at the first meeting I attended, I had positioned myself on the floor near to the back of the room in a conscious attempt not to draw attention to myself. However, the following week, at the invitation and direction of the teacher (‘Farida’) I was ‘moved’ further into the immediate circle of women and this then remained ‘my place’ for the duration of the research. This re-positioning had been preceded by an encounter with Farida before the *halaqa* had started, where she had personally welcomed me, drawing me into a hug and then saying good-naturedly; “I hope [this week] you will listen and not write so much!” (Field notes, 23.06.10). I understood this to indicate that my initial presence at the meeting had not been as subtle as I had planned it to be and the ways in which I was then incorporated into the group from then on revealed much about the ways the *halaqa* operated and the nature of the women who attended. It quickly became apparent that new faces were not passively accepted, but were actively supported and warmly welcomed, and my experiences reflected this group attitude.

Often during a *halaqa*, Farida would specifically ask me if I had understood something, or would sometimes involve me as an example or to illustrate a point. Although sometimes embarrassing, highlighting my assumed ignorance of a topic served to place me both as a novice (in Islamic matters) and outsider amongst the women who attended the *halaqa* and this often formed the basis of interaction, leading to more in-depth conversations. I increasingly found for example, that women sitting around me would go out of their way to ensure I understood an Arabic word or a particular practice, and as time went on I was often greeted directly by name and included in general conversations before and after the *halaqa* meetings.

Ultimately therefore, I feel that my experiences of participant observation were made all the richer as a result of where I was placed by the group (both physically and socially) during that second meeting. It has been noted by some writers on the subject that, during periods of participant observation, it; "...rarely is possible to remain uninvolved with insiders," (Jorgensen 1989: 58). I do not think that such involvement is necessarily something to be shied away from, and had I not actively embraced the opportunities for social contact offered to me during the research, then I feel certain that my research experiences would not have been as rewarding or enjoyable.

### **Qualitative interviewing**

In principle, this storyteller is all people, in their capacities as competent narrators of their lives. (Holstein and Gubrium 1995: 29).

Solely relying on my own perceptions of the *halaqa* and what it meant to the women who attended would only have served to produce a one-sided, linear account, easily risking distancing those who attended the *halaqa* from their own 'story'. By choosing to conduct research with the *halaqa* group, I was not intending to unearth or expose any great mystery

but instead, attempting to present an honest and genuine account of the usual proceedings of this particular *halaqa* in the summer of 2010. My approach to the interviewing stages of the research was very much influenced by my position as a stranger to the space of the *halaqa* and more generally, as a non-Muslim. Even as the research progressed and I gained a fuller understanding of the *halaqa*, I could never claim to be an expert on the topic nor could I claim to have the same sorts of experiences as a practising Muslim might have. I found Holstein and Gubrium's concept of the 'active interview' (1995) to be especially useful in overcoming some of the inevitable issues associated with representation during the research design stages. In particular, their assertion that interview participants should be considered as authoritative and competent "... 'askers' and 'tellers' of experience... (and) also as organizers of the meanings they convey..." (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 19) aided my considerations of the roles assumed by myself and the participants during interviews.

In order to prepare for interviews, I devised some key questions around which I intended to loosely structure the interviews and which were in turn, based on themes I felt might be interesting and/or important to explore. However, I wished to allow for enough flexibility during interviews to explore themes which might be introduced through the participant's own answers and so, in some interviews I would pursue additional avenues of interest as and when they arose. This resulted in interview experiences which varied greatly, with interview durations ranging from ten to forty-five minutes and with the patterns of questioning and answering changing vastly from one interview to the next. The finished transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews therefore, are entirely non-uniform, with some revealing pages of barely interrupted narrative, whilst others displaying shorter, more concise answers with more frequent input from me.

‘Recruitment’ is a rather unsatisfactory term to describe the ways in which I was introduced to potential interview participants. I had handed out a number of information sheets during my first meeting to those who showed an interest in the research and the majority of the women who volunteered to take part in interviews were people who had then contacted me personally. Despite the initial interest shown towards the research, given that everyone who attended the *halaqa* led busy lives, it was understandable that this began to wane somewhat towards the middle weeks of the project. I was intent on not being seen to ‘chase’ people but after a casual conversation with Mahira about the research, she very generously took it upon herself to generate some interest in the project and so her help in the ‘recruitment’ of interviewees, must also be acknowledged. By way of assuring confidentiality, all the names used in the following chapters are pseudonyms, although I have tried to choose names appropriate to the (self-indicated) ethnic heritage of the participant.

Semi-structured interviews were eventually conducted with five participants; Mahira and ‘Sabiqa’ who were both full-time mothers aged in their mid to late-thirties, ‘Hannah’ who, in her late twenties was currently in-between jobs, ‘Janaan’ a G.P. in her early-thirties, currently on maternity leave, and the youngest participant ‘Rafia’, who was in her early twenties and completing a post-graduate qualification. All of the participants were married, had been born and educated to university level in Britain and identified themselves as Muslims; having all been born into the faith with the exception of ‘Hannah’, who had converted to Islam later in life. Interviews were conducted in English and took place at various points over the five weeks in a variety of locations determined by convenience for the participant. Whilst I attended the homes of Sabiqa and Rafia for their interviews, Mahira and Janaan’s interviews took place in the room where the *halaqa* was held following meetings and Hannah’s interview took place in the café of a Cardiff department store.

### **The production of ethnography and the (non-) religious self**

But it is not...techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise [of ethnography]. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in...‘thick description’. (Geertz, 1973; p.6).

If ‘thick description’ was to be the desired aim of employing the qualitative methods outlined above, then responsibility for producing an accurate ethnography of the *halaqa* lay solely with myself. I began attending the *halaqa* with the intention of taking notes<sup>7</sup> which were as detailed as possible, thus hoping to develop a written record of the content and the social dynamics of meetings. Like Emerson *et al* who advocate that; “(a)s inscriptions, fieldnotes are products of and reflect conventions for transforming witnessed events, persons and places into words on paper,” (1995; 9) I initially viewed my note-taking at meetings to be a crucial element of producing a sensitive and accurate ethnographic account of the *halaqa*. However, as I have detailed earlier, my note-taking at the first meeting appeared only to highlight my ‘difference’ in the *halaqa*. Although it was commonplace amongst members to take notes in the *halaqa* (as I will go on to discuss in chapter three), it was obvious that my doing so was at odds with the ways in which members had envisioned my learning about the *halaqa*. Without wishing to cause discomfort to anyone then, I took heed of Farida’s guidance and started to listen more than frequently than I wrote during actual *halaqa* meetings, instead writing my observations down fervently on my way home.

As I was in effect, the primary data collection tool during the research and, given that the fieldwork so consistently caused me to engage with issues surrounding the placement, movement and management of (other people’s) selves and bodies within the spatial context of the *halaqa*, not pausing to briefly consider the role my own self and body assumed in that

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to making notes, I also gathered any leaflets or magazines that were handed out at the end of *halaqa* meetings and which usually detailed upcoming events or charity functions.

space would, I feel, be a substantial oversight on my part. Of all the facets of my outward appearance and components of identity, it was my position as a non-Muslim entering what was an essentially Islamic space (and, in addition to this, a private family home), which caused me most concern initially. I found Alan Peshkin's work detailing his experiences as a Jewish man conducting research in what he calls the 'total world' of a born-again Christian school (1984, 1986) to be particularly useful in helping me address some of these concerns. Like Peshkin, I felt it was important to be honest and open about my (somewhat agnostic and not formally) religious self to participants from the start and his approach to the matter, in which he states that; "(e)ven if we [Peshkin and his research team] were not Christians, we meant not to act in un- or anti-Christian ways..." (Peshkin, 1984; 255) was similar to my own.

I was, for example, particularly careful about the ways in which I chose to respect the Islamic space of the *halaqa* via my body. Dress was certainly an issue I thought about in great depth, deciding that it was important to think carefully about which parts of my body might be on show and whether this would be appropriate. Whilst this did not entail a dramatic alteration to my normal choice of clothing, it did at times mean rejecting certain items which I might otherwise have considered wearing during an average British summer. Certain dress choices were not driven out of a desire to 'fit in' with the attendees of the *halaqa*, but rather out of respect for Islamic guidelines on dressing modestly which I deemed appropriate to follow (to an extent<sup>8</sup>) given the religious nature of the space. Selecting what to wear for each of the *halaqat* I attended became a regular, almost ritualistic part of the fieldwork process, along with planning my journey and transporting myself (via public transport) to the part of the city in which the *halaqa* took place. On reflection however, I wonder how much of this

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<sup>8</sup> Although I offered to cover my hair at the first meeting, I was told by Mahira that this was not necessary and indeed, it was rare that I was the only woman in *halaqa* meetings without a *hijab* or *niqab*.

preoccupation with dressing ‘correctly’ was necessary as, although I would have felt uncomfortable not acknowledging the nature of the *halaqa* through my choice of clothing, that is not to suggest that what I wore mattered all that much to the participants.

Whilst seeking to avoid obscuring the core subject and purpose of this piece of work with matters of reflexivity, like Amanda Coffey I did find that “...the construction and production of self and identity occurs both during and after fieldwork,” (Coffey, 1999; 1) and, where appropriate I have considered this throughout my interpretations of the research, to which we shall now turn.

## Chapter One

### The ‘Cardiff Lady’s Halaqa’: An introduction

“This *halaqa* group is actually very, very old...” (‘Mahira’, 2010.)

The position of Cardiff as a once-thriving nexus of international maritime trade during the mid-nineteenth century has meant that, along with other key British docks such as South Shields and Liverpool, certain areas of the city have a comparatively long history of Muslim settlement and can even claim to have housed some of the “...first relatively permanent Muslim populations...” (Ansari, 2004; 24) in the UK<sup>9</sup>. Although the decline of the British shipping and coal industries made South Wales a less attractive option for economic migrants during the post-war years, today Cardiff is home to an ethnically heterogeneous and varied Muslim population. According to the last Census, in 2001 roughly four per-cent of the city’s population identify themselves as Muslim, forming the majority of the 0.7% (approximately 22,000 people) indicating an Islamic religious identity in Wales as a whole (Office for National Statistics 2004; para. 7).

I felt it was important to include some background history on the Muslim populations of Cardiff because the *halaqa* group I attended is as much a part of that evolving history as it is also a departure from it. Having attended since their teens, two of the longest-standing members, Mahira and Sabiqqa, were able to provide me with some of the history of the *halaqa*, which was also closely aligned to their own personal histories as Muslim women in

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<sup>9</sup> The significance of Cardiff and other Welsh ports such as Newport and Swansea, in the early history of Britain’s Muslim communities have begun to receive scholarly attention in recent years (see for example Ansari, 2004 and Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Although they refer more generally to issues of ‘race’ and racism, I also found contributions made respectively by Evans and Sherwood (both 1991) to be particularly useful as well.



Cardiff. Established in the early 1990s by a woman I shall refer to as ‘Laila’<sup>10</sup> (who was still in attendance at the *halaqa*, but who had since delegated teaching responsibilities to others) and “...a few other girls who were students at that time...” (‘Sabiqa’, 2010), the *halaqa* had taken place in a variety of venues over the years, attracting large numbers of women. Indeed, the revolving nature of leadership and attendance was described to me by Mahira in the following terms;

...it’s always been different people coming and going. And it’s always been run by different people and you get to meet so many different people. ‘Cause a lot of people come to Cardiff, maybe to study and then they move away or they get married, or stuff like that, so it’s always like a rotation of different people. (‘Mahira’, 2010).

Since its earliest days the *halaqa* had taken place in a number of community buildings but, due to various practical reasons, now took place in Mahira’s home. By the time I arrived then, the *halaqa* had been held on Wednesday mornings at Mahira’s house for a period of about a year.

A spacious home in an affluent suburb of Cardiff, many of the participants expressed their preference for the current domestic setting of the *halaqa*, often citing ease of parking as a major factor but also commenting on Mahira’s house itself. Hannah, for example observed that; “...she’s (Mahira) got a nice open, big house, there’s plenty of room...” (‘Hannah’, 2010). Mahira herself also spoke of how much she enjoyed hosting the *halaqa*; “...I feel really happy that it’s [the *halaqa*] in my house as well. ‘Cause I feel like, you know, that I’m doing something good...” (‘Mahira’, 2010). The space of the *halaqa* and how the women who attended felt about it is something I will discuss in more detail during the following chapter, as it formed a large portion of the topics raised during interviews. However, I have

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<sup>10</sup> Although I did not have an opportunity to conduct an interview with ‘Laila’, she was evidently a much-respected member of the *halaqa* and her contributions and friendly advice were often sought out by other attendees. ‘Laila’ was in regular attendance at the *halaqa* and I had many conversations with her during my time there, hence the frequent references to her throughout the research.

included some of the references made towards the space and location of the *halaqa* here as I feel they reveal quite a lot about the evolving and varied nature of ‘Muslim space’ in the city and the mobile nature of the *halaqa* over the years, my aim is to indicate how the very space of the *halaqa* is part of wider, ongoing negotiations for the claiming and re-claiming of ‘Islamic space’ in Cardiff.

The women I spoke with during interviews had discovered the *halaqa* through different channels and although they all attended for the same broad purpose of expanding their knowledge of Islam, the motivation behind their initial attendance varied from one individual to another. Both Mahira and Sabiqah explained that the impetus to join the *halaqa* had initially come from their mothers, who, in Sabiqah’s case, had joined with her (and still attended). Whilst Sabiqah and her mother had seen an advertisement for the *halaqa* in a shop window, Mahira was encouraged to attend as a teenager at the invitation of Laila and out of her mother’s concerns for her religious development; “...she [Mahira’s mother] sort of worried that I was sort of, losing my religion, or not knowing anything,” (‘Mahira’, 2010). Rafia, was also encouraged by female family members to attend, whilst for those who did not have family living in the immediate vicinity of Cardiff, such as Hannah and Janaan, awareness of the *halaqa* was generally obtained through word-of-mouth. Janaan explained to me that she had moved to Cardiff the previous year and had been;

...looking for somewhere where I could meet like-minded people. So someone gave me information about where this happens so along I came- I’m very glad I did! (‘Janaan’, 2010).

Although those with whom I spoke directly had come to the group as a result of their social or familial networks, the *halaqa* was also advertised alongside other *halaqat* taking place across the city (catering for both single and mixed-gender groups) in a local Muslim monthly magazine as a ‘Lady’s *Halaqa*’. Hence I have come to refer to it formally as the ‘Cardiff

Lady's *Halaqa*' throughout this piece, although it was generally referred to as '(the) *halaqa*' by the women who attended.

On an average week therefore, around twenty women would arrive to attend the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' held in Mahira's sitting room. Most of the women (myself included), positioned themselves in a loose circle on the sheets and cushions that Mahira covered the floor with each week, with those who were older, pregnant or restricted by health issues taking their seats on the sofas and chairs lining the parameters of the 'circle'. Young children often accompanied their mothers to the *halaqa* and, as Mahira's own young son was also at home with her at this time, they were encouraged to play together in another room in the house. Although the children tended to come in and out of the *halaqa* frequently, I was consistently impressed by how well-behaved they tended to be and how they often assumed a quieter tone upon entering what the women usually referred to as the '*halaqa* room'. Very young children and babies usually stayed with their mothers during the *halaqa* meetings and there existed amongst members a collective sense of responsibility for children, who were often picked up, comforted, played with or fed by women other than their mothers during *halaqa* meetings.

In the course of the research, I would also sometimes be handed children to hold or watch over and quickly learned that this sense of communal responsibility for childcare also applied to me. Just as Knott found herself involved with childcare during her work with Hindu groups in Britain, this was something that I "...felt most comfortable doing...and indeed, it was expected by everyone that I would do so," (Knott, 1995; 203). However, it was also during these moments that my gender came to the fore of the research experience, forcing me to consider it in ways I had not previously. From the outset, I had understood that my embodied position as a female was likely to be an important factor in the research; apart

from anything else, the fact of my being a woman was essentially the first step in the ‘access’ process (as, had I been male, it is highly unlikely that I would have been granted permission to enter the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ in the first place). Yet whilst being a woman was one of the few things I held in common with the *halaqa* members on an immediate surface level at least, it was during the times I was handed children or found myself part of conversations about married life that I was most readily confronted with the fact that gender is, of course, an incredibly complex and multi-stranded facet of identity. Indeed, as Meredith McGuire aptly points out;

There are very few (if any) self-experiential features, characteristic of all women in all cultures and times, which they share by virtue only of their being embodied as females...(McGuire, 1990; 288).

Thus, amongst other things, the fact that I was both childless and unmarried and was also living independently of (and a relative distance away from) my immediate family<sup>11</sup>, meant that there were always going to be certain experiences which constituted important elements of gender for some *halaqa* members but which lay beyond the boundaries of my own situated understanding of being a woman. Through ascribing me with duties considered natural to the group (such as watching over the children) however, members (unconsciously) assigned me with a feminine identity more in-keeping with that of the *halaqa*. In a way then, these times allowed for a ‘collision’ of sorts, between different gender identities and provided me with the opportunity to interact with people who might otherwise have existed on the peripheries of the research, had I not been coaxed outside of my own ‘self-experience’ as a woman. Consequently, I welcomed the chances offered by *halaqa* members such as Janaan, an interviewee with whom I established a rapport with after her young child took a liking to me

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<sup>11</sup> This latter point was of particular concern for some of the women in the *halaqa*, who kindly took it upon themselves to contact me from time to time after the fieldwork had finished to invite me over to their homes or just to keep in touch.

during one *halaqa* meeting and with whom she left me, when she left the *halaqa* room for a few moments.

Since the *halaqa* itself did not formally begin until the ‘teacher’ (Farida) arrived, getting to Mahira’s home slightly early enabled me to observe and be a part of the general conversations that preceded the *halaqa* as the women arrived and greeted one another. Just as Bhimji observed in her 2009 study (see pages 370-376), women would gather before and after the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ and talk about all manner of things such as; new homes and jobs, schools, pets, clothing and their husbands and children. Whilst I do not wish to draw too much attention to these conversations as a specific area of the research for fear of ‘exoticising’ what is usually an entirely normal output of a regular gathering of friends and acquaintances, it is worth noting that, once inside the ‘*halaqa* room’, religion was rarely deviated from as a key topic of conversation, as this extract from my field notes detail;

This week, conversations that occurred before, during and after the *halaqa* (in the ‘*halaqa*-room’) included:

- The names some women had prior to converting to Islam (referred to by the women as their ‘English’ names) and how in some cases they disliked people still using them.
- Where to obtain ‘Islamic’ clothing from, especially for the summer months. Certain websites and shops were mentioned.
- The closing of a playscheme run by some of the *halaqa* members due to lack of volunteers/funds. This also led to a discussion about the provision of Islamic activities for children during Ramadan. Laila noted that; “The kids get so bored during Ramadan and it would be lovely for them to have something Islamic to do.”
- Some of the mothers in the group discussed how much they disliked wasting food and what they did when their children dropped any on the floor. One mother spoke of how the Prophet Mohammad ate from the floor and if it was good enough for him then who was she to feel superior about it?
- How to keep *halaqa* going through the school summer holidays.

(Field notes, 30.06.10).

Upon arrival at my first meeting, Mahira briefly explained the central purpose of the *halaqa*, which was to help those from Urdu and Punjabi-speaking backgrounds in their pronunciation of Qur'anic Arabic. It quickly became apparent from attending and talking with members that the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' attracted women from a wide-range of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, all intent on improving their knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith. The *halaqat* followed a general pattern which began with a few of the women taking turns to recite a few *ayahs* from a *surah* while Farida, a native Arabic speaker, gently corrected pronunciation if necessary. The Qur'an readings at the beginning of the *halaqa* formed part of a continuous effort to recite the entire Qur'an over time and after being recited in Arabic, one of the women would then volunteer to read the chosen *ayahs* in English as well. Farida would then introduce a particular Hadith to the group, explaining certain Arabic terms and sometimes writing certain key points on a small 'whiteboard' provided for her. This part of the *halaqa* would generally involve a lot of input from members, often stimulating discussion and questions which Farida would try her best to answer, all the time stressing that she was not the only source of knowledge and encouraging members to pursue their own research on a topic. The meeting generally closed with another Qur'an reading (again in both Arabic and English), this time chosen by Farida and linked to the topics discussed in the *halaqa*. A short blessing uttered by Farida marked the start and end of each *halaqa* and a charity (*zakat*) box would be passed round, with any news or notices announced before everyone parted. Of course, not every *halaqa* was uniform in its format and the 'appointing' of Farida, her role as leader of the *halaqa* meetings and the differing content of the *halaqat* I attended will be considered in further detail in chapter three.

Membership of the *halaqa* was both multi-generational and multi-ethnic. Attendees spanned a wide age spectrum, from those aged in their twenties to those in their seventies. Although the majority of *halaqa* members were of South Asian heritage (with younger

members tending to be British-born and older members tending to be first generation migrants), a significant number of white women (of Welsh, English and American descent) who had not been born into Muslim families but had converted at various stages in their lives also attended. There was also Farida, who had been born in the Middle East but who had lived for a significant number of years in Cardiff. Given the timing of the *halaqa* (Wednesday mornings during the school term), most of the women who attended the meetings were either retired, on maternity leave, taking a ‘break’ from their career to raise children, in higher education, between jobs, employed in part-time or flexible work or had taken on domestic responsibilities and/or care-giving on a full-time basis. Thus, with regards to the issues of labour-market participation and family commitments, those attending the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ tended to be at certain stages in their lives. I recognise that due to the timing of the *halaqa*, I did not have as much, if any, contact with those engaged in full-time employment or still attending school as I might have done had I attended *halaqat* scheduled on weekends or evenings, of which, I was informed, there are many in Cardiff. Since I had decided to focus on one *halaqa* group in the city and given the scope of the research, it would have been extremely difficult to gain the views of a full cross-section of people. Therefore, I accept that by attending a *halaqa* on a weekday morning, I have only been able to make contact with certain groups of people and, whilst I acknowledge that both educational attainment and occupational status are sometimes relevant to certain studies, neither were factors I intended to consider in relation to my own research. However, it was interesting to see how interviewees made reference to the composition of attendance at the *halaqa* in relation to their own biographies and current life-stage. For Rafia, who had recently married, this aspect of the *halaqa* was deemed particularly important, as for her it represented part of a personal journey she was currently negotiating into ‘adulthood’. During her interview, Rafia, who had

been attending the group for about one year, compared her previous experiences of attending *halaqat* as a teenager with her current attendance, as such;

Well the one I went to [as a teenager] was more...like focussed on young people growing up and the issues we face in school and to wear *hijab* and things like that. And this one's more for adults- like people who are married, people who have kids, so it's more like, I'm going into that stage now so it's good. ('Rafia', 2010).

Availability during the day, along with an adherence to Islam, could be understood as shared 'constants' amongst *halaqa* members. Yet even attributing a common religious identity to attendees<sup>12</sup>, cannot adequately begin to address individual expressions and interpretations of faith, or the various personal and cultural histories that may or may not have informed religiosity amongst *halaqa* members and so, it might be misleading to regard it as such.

In this opening chapter I have attempted to provide a brief overview of the history and structure of the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' and to illustrate the diversity and variation of it's membership, which is pieced together from my observation and from talking in depth with a small number of the women who attended. In doing so, I hope that my shortcomings as an outside observer, present in the 'field' for what was a very small amount of time, have also been exposed. That there will inevitably exist vast gaps in my understanding of the *halaqa* and the complex networks of relationships it contains over the remaining chapters is then, entirely due to my limited perspective, for which I accept full responsibility.

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst allegiance to a particular branch of Islam was never explicitly expressed during the meetings, it was mentioned to me by one of the interviewees, Hannah, that most attendees aligned themselves with a 'broadly Sunni' identity. This was the closest I came to linking any particular Islamic school of thought with the *halaqa* during my time there.



## Chapter Two

### 'Gathering for Allah's Sake': a spatial analysis of the halaqa

...because we believe as a *halaqa*...(that) we are surrounded by angels and you know, they report back to Allah that we've gathered for His sake and we're gaining knowledge for His sake... ('Sabiqa', 2010).

"Not so many years ago, the word 'space' had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area..." wrote Lefebvre (1974: 1) in the work which was to reformulate the ways in which 'space' was traditionally considered. As I have already alluded to in earlier sections of this work, the idea that most spaces are not merely 'empty area(s)' but instead are sites of identity performance, power contestation, containers and facilitators of culture, history, belief and ritual has rendered 'space' an important point of consideration in, amongst other disciplines, the study of religion. In placing the current piece of work within this milieu then, I was drawn to Knott's (2005) work on the analysis of religion in everyday spaces. The reasoning behind the inclusion of this chapter began with questions borrowed from Knott, where she asks; "What is the location of religion in the secular West? What do we learn about the nature and place of religion from investigating its location?" (Knott, 2005; 3). Debates about the existence of a 'secular West' aside, it quickly became apparent that the space of the *halaqa* presented itself as central to the ways in which the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' perpetuated a sense of Islamic identity whilst upholding their own, very distinct sense of a collective self; all of which took place in the very 'everyday' space of the home. Added to this was the ways in which physical space and material objects formed an important part of the research itself and the inclusion of such aspects had the potential to "...add richness and depth to the data collected," (O'Toole and Were, 2008: 617). In the same article, O'Toole and Were also argue that, through analysing space and what it might mean to individuals or groups, a multiplicity of voices are given room to emerge,

especially, they add; "...from those that are less privileged," (2008; 617). Whilst I believe that 'under-represented' is perhaps a term more applicable to the participants in this study, it is my intention during the course of this chapter, to pay particular attention to the actual physical space of the *halaqa* in order to emphasise it's relevance as central to the research process and also to member's experiences of *halaqa* meetings. Although this chapter concentrates most fully on the *halaqa*-space itself, the spatial essentially underpinned the multi-functions of the *halaqa* to such an extent that the topics considered in the following chapters are also, to varying extents, a reflection of this.

### **The making of 'halaqa-space'**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the room in which the *halaqa* took place was often referred to by members of the group as the '*halaqa*-room'. Building upon this concept, I use the term '*halaqa*-space' in this chapter to differentiate between the times when *halaqa* meetings were actually in progress and the ways in which the space was prepared and used outside of these times. In other words, as we will go on to see, the '*halaqa*-room' was always present, but it only adopted the elements necessary to transform it into '*halaqa*-space' when members embodied the practices associated with meetings.

Whilst observing the religious rituals practised in the homes of the Pakistani migrants she conducted research with in Manchester, Werbner (1990) witnessed a transformative process, whereby usually secular domestic space; "... assume(d), temporarily, certain features of a mosque," (Werbner, 1990; 157). In much the same way, Mahira's sitting room would be transformed every week to become the *halaqa*-space, adopting as it did so, some elements which might usually be associated with more formal Islamic religious spaces, whilst at the same time, also defining itself as an alternative to such spaces. During several of the interviews, the differences between '*halaqa*-space' and 'mosque-space' were articulated in

ways which suggested that the setting was integral to the identity of this particular *halaqa*. Mahira for example, was keen to compare what she understood to be the more informal environment of her home to the previous location of the *halaqa*, which had been a mosque;

...we never had this big a group in mosque, ever. Either because people found it hard for parking or they didn't know about it, or it was just that thing of when you're in a mosque you've got to, I don't know, act a certain way maybe as well?...But like I said, you know, people who are interested in Islam or who don't cover [wear the *hijab* or *niqab*]; they would feel maybe uncomfortable going to the mosque. ('Mahira', 2010).

Hannah, who told me that, in addition to this group she also attended a few different *halaqat* held in a variety of locations throughout the week, also spoke of how she believed that a house provided a less intimidating environment;

I mean some sisters might find, if they're not used to going to the mosque, they might find it easier to go along...it might be less daunting to go into somebody's house than go to the mosque. ('Hannah', 2010).

When considering these two extracts, it is worth noting that I did not ask participants to compare the two religious environments but instead asked them more generally about their feelings towards the space of the *halaqa*. It is interesting to consider then, the associations some participants made between the home-based *halaqa*-space and a sense of accessibility and openness. However, operating in the background of statements such as Mahira's and Hannah's can be traced elements of what Claire Dwyer refers to as; "...specific discourses of exclusion which operate at the level of both the local and the national community," (Dwyer, 1999b; 57). Although Dwyer is writing in relation to British Muslim identity and constructions of 'community', her words could just as easily be applied to the ways in which Mahira and Hannah constructed boundaries between local 'mosque-space' and '*halaqa*-space'. In citing some of the member's feelings about the *halaqa*-space as 'other' to 'mosque-space' however, I do not intend to suggest that the *halaqa* existed as a binary

opposite to the mosque and the presentation of a welcoming, women-only space in contrast to the exclusive, masculine environment of the mosque is certainly not my intention here. Indeed, many of the *halaqa* members regularly attended a mosque for worship (as well as for other purposes) in addition to their *halaqa* attendance and in many cases, the *halaqa* was supplementary to the many other ways in which the women pursued and attained knowledge of their faith and practised Islam.

Though the *halaqa*-space was perceived as separate to that of the mosque by some of its regular inhabitants, it possessed certain features which clearly signalled the weekly transition it underwent from family living space to a place of Islamic worship. A naturally light room with high ceilings and plenty of floor space, Mahira's living room accommodated the group comfortably and on Wednesday mornings, we<sup>13</sup> would enter the house to the smell of incense burning, before removing our shoes and leaving them in the hallway outside (even small children were instructed to remove their footwear upon entry to the *halaqa*-room). As the weeks progressed, I observed that the hallway acted as an 'anteroom' of sorts, where members of the *halaqa* would gather to talk whilst removing or putting on shoes and coats and children would run around playing together. The hallway displayed all the usual hallmarks of busy family life such as post, school bags, family photographs, hooks and baskets overflowing with different shoes and coats, as well as some of the family pets including a (very vocal) parrot and a tank of tropical fish. In contrast however, the *halaqa*-room, accessed directly from the hall, was noticeably different and marked by the absence of a television, toys and other items which might suggest more informal use of the space (indeed, there were other rooms in the house reserved for such activity). Instead, the bookcases in the '*halaqa*-room' were lined with Islamic literature, pictures depicting the

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<sup>13</sup> I use the collective here because, although I travelled alone to the weekly *halaqa*, my arrival tended to coincide with that of at least one other woman and so I rarely entered Mahira's house on my own.

*Ka'bah* and verses from the Qur'an hung on the walls, light gauze covered the windows and, save for two large sofas and a dining table and chairs, the room was minimally furnished; all of which lent it (to an outsider like myself at least) a more formal feel. In describing how she and her husband had renovated their house, Mahira explained how the '*halaqa*-room' came into existence;

...when we moved in, we knocked out the wall to make it one big room, because we've got a big family and also, I had made the intention at that time that we would use it for the sake of Allah, you know? For the sake of God. (Mahira, 2010).

In deciding that a portion of her home should be employed chiefly for religious purposes, it would seem that Mahira had designated the room as different to the rest of the house from the start. Her chosen purpose for the space was achieved when the living room actively became '*halaqa*-space', something Mahira felt was the right use for the room; "...when we did start using it [for the *halaqa*], I thought; 'This is what it was meant for, it was supposed to happen this way.'" (Mahira, 2010).

Movement from the hallway to the *halaqa*-room also signified some subtle changes in the way the women positioned and conducted themselves, all of which were suggestive of the fact that Mahira's intended use of the space was experienced by the other members as well. Once inside the *halaqa*-room; voices would assume hushed tones, bodies would immediately assume a seated position (mostly on the floor but also upon chairs and sofas), Qur'ans and notebooks would be taken out and women would generally talk amongst themselves; sometimes going over the previous week's *halaqa*, or attempting to quietly occupy children. Although refreshments were always offered by Mahira, they were rarely consumed within the *halaqa*-room, with the only exception being a glass of water which was provided for Farida, whose arrival signalled an even deeper level of quiet within the *halaqa*-room. I will discuss the actual religious content of the *halaqat* I was witness to, along with the processes of

learning and teaching which occurred within the *halaqa*-space in further depth during the following chapter. Presently however, I wish to consider the role of the bodies occupying the *halaqa*-space as I feel that, along with Mahira's efforts in preparing the room, the corporeal presence and reality of the members of the *halaqa* were also central to the production of the *halaqa*-space.

### **Bodies in the 'halaqa-space'**

As mentioned in the introduction to this work, the term '*halaqa*' quite literally refers to a 'circle' in Arabic and this was roughly the shape that the seated bodies of the women in the *halaqa* assumed during meetings. Although some of the women I spoke with possessed a vague understanding of the history of *halaqat* in early Islam most, with the exception perhaps of Farida, were (quite understandably) concerned with what it signified for them in the present. By sitting in such a way then, some of the earliest traditions of the faith were voluntarily recreated by the *halaqa* members through their bodies. Worship in the *halaqa*-space, was not embodied in prostration as in a mosque, but was instead observed through the seated bodies of the *halaqa* members.

Aside from the spiritual, the ways in which bodies were positioned in the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' also reflected current relationships and friendships. Members tended to occupy the same spots each week, with women who shared transportation often sitting together and mothers often positioning themselves near the door, should they have to leave in order to attend to their children. As explained during the methodology section of this piece, I was 'moved' further into the 'circle' by Farida during my second week of attendance. Following this, my 'place' became a spot in the corner of the room, in between a sofa and the doorway. Although I was frequently offered the sofa by members, I opted to stay seated on the floor for two reasons; the first being that, as a young, able-bodied person, I did not want

to take up valuable ‘sofa space’ lest someone more in need require it and secondly, this position enabled me to feel far less exposed. Whilst I had a good vantage point of the *halaqa* and was well within Farida’s line of vision, there were also intensely private times shared by the *halaqa* when I felt that my presence was only serving to intrude and thus was grateful to be able to (often involuntarily) physically ‘shrink back’ from the wider group (as was the case when the group were collectively mourning<sup>14</sup>). There were also rare occasions when I found my non-Muslim self suddenly at odds with what was being talked about in the *halaqa*, such as the time a discussion on non-believers (*kafirs*) took place. It must be pointed out that although such occasions did at times, leave me feeling uncomfortable; I never had the impression that this was the result of any hostility felt towards me or non-Muslims generally. With regards to such experiences, I return to the work of Alan Peshkin because, like him, I had chosen to attend the *halaqa* and thus, for the most part; “...savoured being where I would not ordinarily be (and) subjecting myself to the hazards, indignities, and fun of abiding as an outsider,” (Peshkin, 1986; 16). In terms of my personal beliefs, I was always going to be an intruder in the *halaqa*-space and as such, was likely at times, to experience some discomfort. However, I was always aware that I was stepping into a social world which belonged to others and that to only shed light on the positive aspects of it (of which there were many) would be to ignore the reality that everyone in the *halaqa*-space (including myself) were complex beings with their own histories and understandings of the world.

### *A blessed space*

In a similar vein, it quickly became apparent during interviews and from observing the *halaqa* that there were also certain bodies believed to be present in the *halaqa*-space which as a non-Muslim, I did not have access to. These were the celestial bodies described by

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<sup>14</sup> A detailed consideration of such an event is provided in chapter four.

Sabiqa in the opening quote to this chapter whom were summoned by the act of gathering in the *halaqa*-space. Beyond the physical spatial aspects of the *halaqa*, that is, the ones that I could see, hear, smell and inhabit with my own body, this kind of disclosure revealed how much I inevitably missed by relying on my own interpretations of the '*halaqa*-space'. To members, the act of sitting together and learning about Islam, endowed the *halaqa*-space with its very essence; that the space and all in it would be blessed by Allah. Sabiqa described this feeling to me as an

Aura, I suppose you could say, or some sort of you know, beautiful feeling in there, yeah definitely. And peace and openness and just really...it's very relaxed, you know? ('Sabiqa', 2010).

The concept of 'blessing' involved in holding and attending the *halaqa* was mentioned often during interviews and was clearly not just felt by the immediate *halaqa* members. Admitting that preparing the *halaqa*-room was something she sometimes did with a degree of reluctance, Mahira told me of the encouragement she regularly received from her husband;

...I've got to Tuesday night and I'm getting everything ready again and I say to my husband; 'I'm so tired! I've got to do it all again!' And he goes; 'Just think of the blessing! Just think of the reward!' ('Mahira', 2010).

Hence, holding the *halaqa* in their home clearly meant a lot to Mahira and her family, not just in terms of the value it held in this lifetime, but also what it would mean in the long-term and beyond, in the hereafter.



### Chapter Three

#### 'From Cradle to Grave': Learning and teaching in the *halaqa*

“I mean, one of the fundamentals is that we’re supposed to be learning, seeking knowledge from cradle to grave...” (Janaan, 2010).

Although the *halaqa* I observed was multi-functional in that it provided a space for a great many types of interactions, its core purpose was, of course, to facilitate the expansion of Islamic knowledge amongst the women who attended. The theological content of the *halaqat* I was present at was varied and unfortunately there is not the space to discuss each meeting sufficiently here. Instead, I have chosen to summarise some of the key topics of *halaqa* meetings during that five week period to provide some indication of what was usually discussed. Topics included; the life of the Prophet, the very first days of Islam and the growth of the faith, *iman* (faith) in everyday life, the importance of *zakat* (charity) and generosity, sin and reward in *jannah* (heaven/Paradise) and in the latter weeks, a significant portion of *halaqa* meetings was devoted to the group preparing themselves spiritually for Ramadan. As I have mentioned elsewhere, teaching and learning in the *halaqa* relied upon interaction amongst members and Farida would often pause to answer questions from *halaqa* members and to ask the group if they were following.

Attempting to memorise all that was learned during *halaqa* meetings whilst managing busy family and professional lives, was an ongoing challenge for most members. The issuing of what group members referred to as ‘reminders’ was a common feature of *halaqa* meetings and as I came to understand, usually meant a member speaking about something they might have learned in the past (such as a certain Hadith) or one of the basic tenets of Islam with the intention of ‘reminding’ the group. In attempting to provide a succinct example of the different ways in which the women learned and developed their own personal ‘reminders’, I

wish to focus on the example of Rafia, who spoke with me at length about the ways in which she acquired knowledge in the *halaqa* and developed her own system of ‘reminders’. An avid note-taker during meetings, Rafia explained to me how she liked Farida’s teaching methods “...because she starts from the beginning of something, like the beginning of the Prophet’s life or the beginning of a *surah*...” (‘Rafia’, 2010) which made it easier for her to document the issues discussed in order to go over them again at a later date;

...I do make lots of notes! But I like to read them afterwards and keep reminding myself of what she’s [Farida] said...to remind yourself. Because it gets hard and like, you forget, you forget things and it’s just nice to lift you up a bit. (‘Rafia’, 2010).

Describing to me how she had filled entire notebooks in this way, Rafia explained how these acted as her own personal catalogues of ‘reminders’ in her continuous growth as a Muslim;

...and then you’ve got like a nice like, kind of notebook to look back on. I read them a lot- I start from the beginning and I keep reading them. (‘Rafia’, 2010).

As one of the youngest members and someone who was completing a postgraduate qualification in Islamic studies at the time of her interview, I was interested to know if Rafia’s recent experiences of formal education were reflected in the ways she approached learning in the *halaqa*. It was certainly true that older *halaqa* members were less likely to take notes during meetings and those who had children with them were generally too preoccupied, but Rafia’s decision to make notes was also a personal choice that hinted at a more formal ‘training’ in the ways she approached learning. She compared her experiences of university-level education to the *halaqa* as such;

It’s [the *halaqa*] more kind of relaxed and, I don’t know, but you want to learn from Aunty [a polite way of referring to Farida]...Because [at university] they’re all like quoting from a book, from this source and that source and you just get caught up in the sources and not really the story...to listen to the story is nicer, sometimes. (‘Rafia’, 2010).

Judging by the numbers who regularly attended the *halaqa*; the impetus to learn that Rafia describes, fuelled by both the informality of the environment and the personality and teaching style of Farida were all factors which continued to attract members.

Yet attendance at the *halaqa* was driven by other, more religious factors. This chapter opens with a quote from my interview with Janaan in which she stressed how she considered learning to be a valuable part of her religious life. Incorporating this particular saying of the Prophet Mohammad (“seeking knowledge from the cradle to the grave”) into responses to questions about knowledge and learning in the *halaqa* was not uncommon amongst interviewees and was often quoted as a means of explaining to me the life-long process of Islamic learning. The pursuit and acquisition of Islamic knowledge were described to me by Mahira as constant, where completion was neither possible nor desirable; “...with Islam, the more you learn, the more you feel that you don’t know...like none of the scholars in Islam have ever said that; ‘we know everything’, you know?” (‘Mahira’, 2010).

The impact of the learning and teaching processes at work in the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ on the life-long pursuit of Islamic knowledge and the ways in which women practised Islam on a daily basis was different for each individual participant and was conveyed to me in a range of interesting ways. Hannah, for example, described the *halaqa* as a weekly “boost” to her commitment to Islam within a

...society which isn’t Muslim, I mean it’s not overtly Christian either, but...a lot of people are against Islam and you know, your faith can be tested quite a lot. And I think you need that boost, that regular boost...” (‘Hannah’, 2010).

Janaan, on the other hand, found that the *halaqa* provided a time to re-assess her priorities and connect to her faith in an otherwise very busy life;

My husband thinks that I come back [from the *halaqa*] as a much calmer, more serene person! [laughs]...it does remind you how we

should be...it reminds me of the purpose of life and that you know, ultimately, we are, we've got to be preparing ourselves not only in this life...but also for our hereafter as well. ('Janaan', 2010).

### **Leadership in the halaqa**

Central to knowledge exchange and production in *halaqa* was, of course, Farida. Although I did not have the opportunity to conduct an interview with her, I had quite a lot of interaction with Farida and witnessed her teaching style first-hand during the *halaqa* I attended. The commitment and effort Farida devoted to leading the group and preparing *halaqa* were evident, as was the respect and admiration she commanded from the group, to the extent that the following extract taken from my interview with Sabiqah was fairly typical;

The teacher, she's just brilliant, you know, she's such a blessing! It's like she's got so much knowledge and so much access to many books we can't even read, you know? Because she's an Arabic speaker, so she can give us knowledge through those, by translating for us... ('Sabiqah', 2010).

The way that Farida came to be 'appointed' to the position of 'teacher' in the *halaqa* had been informal but not casual, and reflected the high importance given to the role, with members collectively deciding upon who to approach within the immediate 'community'<sup>15</sup> when a vacancy arose. Since its inception in the early 1990s, the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' had witnessed several changes in leadership, with women tending to 'resign' or pass on teaching duties when they moved away, had children, or took up full-time employment. At one point, Mahira herself had led the group, after Laila (the initial leader) and her family had temporarily moved away from Cardiff. I was able to establish from conversations with *halaqa* members that Laila's daughter, 'Halimah'<sup>16</sup> had then returned to Cardiff some years later when she married (before being rejoined by Laila and the rest of her family) and had

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<sup>15</sup> I employ the term 'community' here with caution because, although interviewees used the term frequently, it cannot be assumed that they speak for all Muslims in Cardiff. Instead, the term 'community' is generally used in this work to refer to those networks of people immediately connected to *halaqa* members.

<sup>16</sup> 'Halimah' also happened to be the initial, 'invisible' gatekeeper for this project.

subsequently taken over teaching the *halaqa* while Mahira raised her young family. Although a certified *alima*, it would seem that it was the high esteem in which Halimah and her whole family were held by the women in the *halaqa* that really ‘qualified’ her to lead the group. When Halimah had recently left the *halaqa* in order to take up full-time employment, the ‘recruitment process’ (if we can apply such a formal term) involved in ‘appointing’ Farida was explained to me by Mahira as such;

...she’s [Farida] been in our community for so many years, everybody loves and respects her...somebody, they said; ‘Oh what qualification does she have?’ and I said; ‘To be honest, I don’t really know, I’ve never asked her.’ But I said; ‘You know, from knowing her and seeing the way she is, I think she’s over-qualified!’ (‘Mahira’, 2010).

It would seem then, that community standing and good character rather than formal Islamic qualifications, were the main pre-requisites for the job of leading the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’. Farida’s skills as a native Arabic speaker, her wide breadth of knowledge on the Qur’an and Hadiths and her experience of teaching other women’s *halaqa* groups (she also led an Arabic-language *halaqa* on a different day), were all acknowledged as being highly beneficial to the group. However, it was her position within the immediate ‘community’ as mother to a large family and wife to a man held in high regard for his work at one of Cardiff’s mosques that really cemented Farida’s place as the right person to lead the *halaqa*. The fact that Farida’s personal qualities were rated just as highly as her possession of religious knowledge amongst *halaqa* members was alluded to in the following observations, made by Hannah;

I find her so, so easy to listen to. Even though Arabic is her first language and obviously English is her second, when she puts a point across, I feel that she feels it and she’s not just saying it...Yeah, she’s got a lovely way about her and I see her as quite a, a role model as well I think...a really good example of a Muslim woman. (‘Hannah’, 2010).

Hannah’s closing line here is indicative of the value assigned to Farida’s feminine identity in considerations of her leadership abilities. Indeed, femininity, or rather what it meant to ‘be’ a

Muslim woman was never far from the topics discussed in the *halaqa* and it is hardly surprising that Farida should be valued for her ability to embody what *halaqa* members perceived to be ideal notions of a ‘good’ Muslim woman. Similar to Daniel Winchester’s (2008) research with a group of American Muslim converts, where he noted that morality was actively constructed and achieved through “...embodied religious practices such as ritual prayer (*salat*), fasting (*sawm*), and covering (*hijab*)...” (Winchester, 2008; 1755, original italics), a gendered sense of moral ‘self-hood’ was also apparent in the embodied practice of sitting and learning in the *halaqa*. Subjects such as modesty, the position of women in early Islam, the role of mothers in religiously educating and spiritual nurturing of children and the issues associated with menstruation and fasting during Ramadan, frequently arose and were discussed during *halaqa* meetings. In addition to this, Farida’s position as a mother and wife meant that questions from younger women regarding family life were often posed directly to her.

It would seem then, that attendance at the *halaqa* acted as a regular point of connection with Islam for the women who attended and also, in some cases, provided an opportunity for reaffirming their Muslim identity. However, as Janaan’s earlier quote indicates, members believed that their attendance at the *halaqa* was also beneficial to their families. Indeed, many interviewees spoke of how the *halaqa* directly influenced the ways in which they discussed religious matters with their husbands, children and friends, as Mahira described to me;

...you go to a *halaqa* say, in the morning and then all day you’ll be thinking about it. And then you’ll talk to your family, or you’ll talk to someone and you’ll mention something [from the *halaqa*]. (‘Mahira’, 2010).

Unfortunately, there was not sufficient space within this chapter to do justice to a discussion of Foucauldian theories of knowledge and power in the *halaqa*. However, the above extracts

begin to illustrate the complex and far-reaching power structures at work both in and beyond the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’. As the section on leadership indicates, Farida was perceived by members to be at the fore of internal power structures, as her position as ‘knowledge-provider’ was enhanced by her linguistic abilities. However, I would like to end this chapter with the observations of a *halaqa* member, made during a meeting, which accurately summed up the understanding amongst members that the *halaqa* was a primary site of gendered knowledge acquisition, created in part by wider, ongoing and potentially oppressive power struggles sometimes operating in (but by no means exclusive to) Islam. During an in-depth discussion of a Hadith, Laila succinctly pointed out that;

It seems taken for granted that the men learn about this sort of thing in the mosque or at *jummah* prayers, but for us women, where can we hear or learn about these things? (‘Laila’, cited in field notes, 30/06/10).

## Chapter Four

### Sisters in Islam: *The embodiment of friendship and Islamic sisterhood in the halaqa*

“As a sisterhood, you’ve got to have this thing where you keep an eye on each other.” (‘Mahira’, 2010).

Whilst the primary purpose for gathering together at the *halaqa* was the furthering of Islamic knowledge, an inevitable and natural output of the regular, weekly meeting was the development of friendships and acquaintances over time. Friendships, and especially women’s friendships, have tended to receive rather less scholastic attention than other human relationships such as marriage and kinship in the past, although the last twenty years have witnessed an increase in work focusing upon female friendships at various life stages (see for example; O’Connor (1992), Hey (1997), Green (1998) and Andrew and Montague (1998)). In their work concerning the importance of talk amongst female friends, Johnson and Aries (1983) locate this relative lack of general academic interest in friendship in the idea that it has not traditionally been considered a necessary or valid component of societal formation;

...other relationships bear clear ties to the institutional and structural foundations of a society. Friendships, of all human relationships, exhibit the weakest structural ties because they imply neither permanence, as does the kinship link, nor face-to-face constancy, as does the work or neighbourhood link. (Johnson and Aries, 1983; 353).

Additionally, it has been noted that where studies of friendship do exist, they have usually been conducted in social settings and environments which have served to advantage certain groups of men as those who “...frequently have more time and financial resources to devote to sociability than women, because of their role within the domestic and paid division of labour,” (Allan 1996; 93). More specifically, the scarcity of work concerning friendship amongst girls and women has been attributed to the idea that such relationships are often accepted to the point of being ‘naturalized’ (see Hey, 1997; 2) or thought of as trivial and therefore not considered worthy of in-depth study or analysis. However, if female friendships



in general have long been overlooked, then the friendships of those women who have traditionally been further relegated to the margins of history and society as a result of social class, 'race', ethnicity and even religious identity, are even less reported on. In deciding whether a consideration of the obviously strong friendships and theme of Islamic sisterhood so frequently mentioned by *halaqa* members was warranted, I was motivated again by Johnson and Aries, who urge that;

Treating female friendships seriously and treating them as they exist, rather than as they are presumed to exist, is an important part of the contemporary movement to reclaim and recount women's lives. (Johnson and Aries, 1983; 354).

Thus, although I feel that any declaration of 'reclaiming and recounting' the lives of the women who attended the 'Cardiff Lady's *Halaqa*' would be both false and wrong on my part, granting sufficient space to the role of friendship and 'sisterhood' in the group will, I hope, serve to indicate just how important such elements were, rather than reducing them to the realms of the trivial.

If deciding to write about friendship as a vital component of the structure of the *halaqa* was one thing, then defining quite what those 'friendships' consisted of and were built upon, proved to be an altogether more challenging task. In looking for a definition which most adequately encompassed the features of friendship in the *halaqa*, I gravitated towards Andrew and Montague's (1998) work on the subject of female friendship in the workplace and their assertion that friendship;

...acts as a resource which can help us to cope with the problems and contingencies which we face in our daily lives. Friends can provide practical help, information, expertise as well as a feeling of security, a sense of self and positive affirmation of identity. (Andrew and Montague, 1998; 356).

If we take this explanation as a guide to understanding (but not dictating) what friendship is, the role of friendship in the *halaqa* and what is more, the role of religious identity in those

friendships, becomes clearer. As mentioned in the first chapter, attendance at the *halaqa* was revolving in nature and, with new women attending all the time, the potential to meet new people as well as maintaining and supporting longer-term relationships was extensive. The networks of existing friendships and familial connections in the *halaqa* were complex and far-reaching and, as I was reliant on the women I spoke with explaining them to me, the understanding I gained in the time I was there was only partial. As an important function of the *halaqa*, its social aspects were not only made evident to me during the time I spent at the meetings, but were discussed by many of the women I spoke with in terms of being a distinct advantage and attraction to attending. For Sabiqa, who had been attending the *halaqa* since its earliest days, the meetings were a chance to connect with old friends and hear the latest ‘community’ news;

...I know a lot of the people there, you know, for years and years and years and it’s just really nice. And it’s a nice sort of meeting point really for every week, so in a way you sort of catch up with people but you know, find out what’s going on within the community, within, you know, people’s lives... (‘Sabiqa’, 2010).

When comparing this particular *halaqa* to other mixed-gender ones she attended throughout the week, Hannah linked the fact that the *halaqa* was a female-only environment to its increased potential as a space for socialising;

...I think I do prefer the sisters-only (*halaqat*)...you just feel more relaxed. Though brothers can obviously bring a different dimension. But yeah, on the whole I would say I like the sister-only one, ‘cause it’s a bit of a social as well and stuff and you get that aspect which is nice. (‘Hannah’, 2010).

The above extracts seek to show the ways in which the *halaqa*-space facilitated the regular social exchange upon which friendship is built over time. What became obvious during the time I spent with the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ was that Islamic identity was essential to the discourse of friendship and sociability developed by the group and was most clearly

articulated in the ways group members discussed and practised what they felt was active Islamic ‘sisterhood’.

### *A space of sisterhood*

Once the slogan of second-wave feminism, the concept of universal ‘sisterhood’, has gradually been challenged to the point of dismissal by feminist academics such as Kum-Kum Bhavnani (1993) who writes that;

...all women’s interests are not always and automatically coincident and it thus becomes clear that the meanings of ‘feminism’ and ‘woman’ can only be usefully analysed within their particular geographic, racialised and historical settings. (Bhavnani, 1993; 30).

I draw attention to Bhavnani’s words not because I wish to analyse the friendships of the *halaqa* from within a Western feminist framework, but because she raises the point that, when considering the category ‘woman’, context is everything. Traditional Islamic concepts of sisterhood pre-date and exist separately to those which were propagated in 1960s Europe and America and yet, their premise is largely the same, albeit defined along the lines of religion as well as gender. Whilst I am not attempting to prove or disprove the Islamic concept of sisterhood (or for that matter ‘brotherhood’ or even ‘*ummah*’) here, I am interested in how friendship and ‘sisterhood’ were perpetuated and maintained in the very specific micro-context of the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’.

For members at this particular *halaqa*, the concept of Islamic ‘sisterhood’ was very much constructed around action and deeds. Frequently interwoven into many of the *halaqa* meetings, references to ‘sisterhood’ were common and members often referred to and addressed one another as ‘sister’, particularly where the name of a person was unknown<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> On a number of occasions, I also found myself being addressed as ‘sister’ during my time with the *halaqa*. Although this initially left me unsure as to whether I had made my non-Muslim identity clear enough, I later understood it to be an act of courtesy and inclusion.

The *halaqa* itself was often used as a prime example of a site of sisterhood and this was most in evidence during the first meeting I attended, where Farida reminded the group to “...make sisterhood,” (Field notes, 16.06.10) through the act of learning together and supporting each other in the pursuit of knowledge. The constant reminders issued by Farida, to make ‘little’ *halaqat* with groups of like-minded women also served as a way of reinforcing the concept of sisterhood as one which was strongly based on shared faith.

Yet ‘sisterhood’ was not just talked about in the *halaqa*, but was practised in the ways the women supported one another practically, emotionally and spiritually. For example, in describing to me some examples of the ways in which ‘practical help’ (to quote Johnson and Aries) was organised for those in need in through the *halaqa*, Mahira told me of a recent occasion where *halaqa* members had organised a cooking rota for a local Muslim woman who had recently given birth;

I went over to this woman’s house, she didn’t know me! [laughs] And I went in with the food and everything and she was just like; ‘Oh this is so nice, I’ve never met you before!’...And then she started coming to the *halaqa*...and it was just nice that you don’t have to be related to somebody, you don’t have to *know* somebody, to do something nice for someone, you know? So that’s what we call sisterhood! (‘Mahira’, 2010).

Apart from this example, support was demonstrated regularly in the time I spent with the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ such as the time the group collectively directed a new-comer to the *halal* shops in Cardiff or when they planned to attend court to support a member when her asylum case was due to be heard. In thinking about sisterhood in the *halaqa* however, two specific instances stand out most vividly for me and as such, I have chosen to focus on these in more detail below.

### **The halaqa as support system (two case studies)**

There were two occasions during the time I spent with the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ where I experienced first-hand how the group encountered and confronted issues of death, grief and loss. The first was during my interview with Rafia and the second was when a particularly tragic event had taken place in the life of a *halaqa* member just days before I attended my last *halaqa*. I have chosen to include how the group responded to these particularly difficult times, as I feel they not only show how sisterhood and friendship were most effectively utilized but also how the *halaqa* itself acted as a valuable supportive resource.

### **Case One: Rafia’s Story**

During my interview with Rafia, when asked how important the friendship aspect of the *halaqa* was to her, she spoke of how the friends she had made were especially supportive when she had recently lost a baby seven months into pregnancy;

...it’s a really nice support group type of thing. And every week, everyone was asking me; ‘Oh how are you feeling now?’, ‘How’s everything going?’...Because they were friends before and now like they’re really nice, they’re really good. [They] really helped me to get through it as well. (‘Rafia’, 2010).

As well as the support she received from the women attending the *halaqa* (some of whom she explained, had been through similar situations), it was also the content of *halaqa* meetings that had aided Rafia in beginning to come to terms with her grief. Rafia was frank and open when talking about this period of her life with me, describing how her baby (a daughter) had survived in intensive care for a month following an emergency delivery and how her attendance at the *halaqat* during this time had helped Rafia to prepare for her child’s death (something Rafia accepted as pre-ordained or ‘written’)

...I kept going to see her [the baby] every day in hospital and um, I was feeding her and things like that but it was written for her, so that’s ok. So then to prepare for it...it’s really strange, every topic in *halaqa*

was kind of related to that, when I was going through it. You know, like you relate it to yourself and it really helped me to prepare and afterwards to grieve a little bit and then to get back to normal as well. ('Rafia', 2010).

In her qualitative study of British Bangladeshi Muslim families bringing up children with genetic conditions, Santi Rozario (with Gilliat-Ray, 2007) discusses the "...coping mechanisms," (2007; 76) developed by families in order to deal with the challenging situation of looking after a severely disabled child or living with the knowledge of 'carrying' a genetic syndrome. One such 'coping mechanism' described by Rozario was the way parents of very ill children; "...gained consolation by placing the responsibility on to Allah." (Rozario, 2007; 87). The will of Allah was a recurring topic in the *halaqat* I attended and one which was especially reiterated by group members during times of difficulty or sadness. For Rafia, who also told me that she and her husband had been offered counselling by the hospital at the time but had yet to take up the service, the *halaqa* had reinforced her faith during what had been a particularly difficult time, providing support and rehabilitation.

Although I was not attending the *halaqa* at this point in Rafia's life, I was able to witness how the group negotiated loss and grief in the ways that she described to me, during my attendance at a meeting which is detailed below.

### **Case Two: Dealing collectively with grief in the halaqa**

The meeting in question was the final one in the *halaqa's* 'year' and as such, was also the last I attended. It had begun as usual with women gathering and talking amongst themselves as they waited for others to arrive (as it happened, neither Farida nor Mahira were able to attend this particular meeting) but as more women gradually arrived, it was announced that sadly, one of the women who regularly attended had lost her young son in an accidental house fire two nights before. Grief and shock were expressed openly amongst the *halaqa* members, with many women crying and new 'waves' of sadness enveloping the group

as members arrived and heard the news. Mahira had left a letter informing the group of the general format of this week's *halaqa*, in which certain women had been asked to issue 'reminders' and speak about certain Hadiths and she had also included an address for the woman who had lost her child. Group members immediately began to organise practical ways to help (such as arranging a cooking rota) but a discussion also emerged in which *halaqa* members attempted to make sense of the situation and provide comfort and solace to one another. It was concluded that, although it was desperately sad, the child was now in "a much better place" (field notes, 14.07.10); what had happened was the will of Allah and that He was now protecting the child from a world full of sin. It must be noted that, although this discussion was intended to calm and reassure all the *halaqa* members, the women present emphasised the fact that although God's will was probably understood and accepted, it would be of little consolation to the grieving parents at present. This in turn sparked fresh empathy from the mothers in the room, leading me to conclude that, whilst religion was a powerful source of friendship in the *halaqa*, it did not always usurp the ability of the women to connect and sympathise with one another through shared life experiences.

## Conclusions

Like most Islamic religious spaces in Britain then, if the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ is able to tell us anything, it is that such spaces are varied, dynamic and often perform several functions. Such observations are hardly new, or specific to ‘*halaqa*-space’. However, as I have sought to show, it is the individuals within such spaces and the practices, morals and relationships they embody and maintain that really constitute such spaces and, on a larger scale, Islam in Britain today.

As with most ethnographic studies, a great many other interesting themes arose during my time with the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ and indeed, I could have written in far more depth about the subjects I did choose to include here, had there been the space to. The two most obvious shortcomings of this project are that it is highly localised and lacks much (if any) external validity. Yet, that is precisely the nature of Islamic *halaqat* in Britain (and indeed, across the world) and if one of the objectives of this project was to provide some illustration of this, then I hope that has been achieved. Further research on this subject might consider *halaqat* of different gender, language or age compositions and also those taking place in a range of environments and locations (including the virtual). I remain convinced that qualitative methods are a useful way of approaching research with *halaqat* groups and as such, the personhood and biography of the researcher will always be an important factor and one which could alter the course of research in infinite ways. However, if any large-scale research with British *halaqat* is to be done, then there is certainly scope for some quantitative work to be performed in this area too.

Finally, throughout the course of this research, I have grappled with the question of whether it is always important and necessary to produce accounts of private, even ‘hidden’, spaces. Some feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose (1999) locate the need to ‘know’ and



make visible certain spaces within a history of masculinist, colonial attempts to dominate it. Although I am not male, as a white, British, non-Muslim, the question of whether I had unwillingly contributed to such a history in making the space of the ‘Cardiff Lady’s *Halaqa*’ ‘known’, was a troubling one.

In the closing stages of this project, I still remain unsure of the answer to such questions. However, in thinking about whether another account of British Islamic religious space is warranted, I am buoyed by the words of one of the participants who, when asked at the end of her interview why she had wanted to speak about the *halaqa* responded;

Just for them [people] to see what the women are like, what, you know, general Muslims are like and we’re just like everyone else really, just trying to do our best you know...So yeah, long live the *halaqa*! (‘Sabiqa’, 2010).

This then, is reason enough for me.

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**Interview Transcript References:**

- ‘Hannah’, 2010. Length of interview: 26 mins. Location: Department store café, Cardiff, UK. (25/06/10)
- ‘Janaan’, 2010. Length of interview: 10 mins. Location: House where the *halaqa* is held, Cardiff, UK. (30/06/10)
- ‘Mahira’, 2010. Length of interview: 46 mins. Location: Participant’s home (where the *halaqa* is held), Cardiff, UK. (23/06/10)
- ‘Rafia’, 2010. Length of interview: 27 mins. Location: Participant’s home, Cardiff, UK. (14/07/10)
- ‘Sabiqa’, 2010. Length of interview: 43 mins. Location: Participant’s home, Cardiff, UK. (16/07/10)

**Field Notes:**

- 16.06.10. Location: House where the *halaqa* is held, Cardiff, UK.
- 23.06.10. Location: House where the *halaqa* is held, Cardiff, UK.
- 30.06.10. Location: House where the *halaqa* is held, Cardiff, UK.
- 07.07.10. Location: House where the *halaqa* is held, Cardiff, UK.
- 09.07.10. Location: ‘Farida’s’ house, Cardiff, UK.
- 14.07.10. Location: House where the *halaqa* is held, Cardiff, UK.

All anonymised transcripts and field notes available upon request.