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‘Look into the Book of Life’: Muslim musicians, Sufism, and postmodern spirituality in Britain.

Abstract:

Spirituality has been theorised as a characteristic of late-modern society, a consequence of individualisation and of a relativized marketplace of religion. Drawing on findings from ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Muslim musicians in the UK, the author claims that spirituality can indeed be considered a postmodern discourse of belief – with trans-religious applicability – but that at the same time it can be articulated from within a clear understanding of group/religious membership. The concepts of ‘spiritual capital’ and ‘expressive communalism’ are used to explain the ways through which a postmodern discourse of spirituality is utilised by Muslim musicians from within contemporary networks of Sufism in the West. The author suggests that the cosmopolitan and inclusive nature of these types of Sufism in Britain – particularly amongst third and fourth generation Muslims – represents a frontier of religious change in the UK and a challenge to traditional forms of religious authority, discourse and membership.

Keywords:

Sufism, spirituality, spiritual capital, Islam, individualization, music

Introduction

Over the last two decades sociologists of religion have paid increasing attention to the concept of spirituality in an attempt to understand changing forms of belief in late-modern society. Discussions have ranged from the notion of a spiritual marketplace (Roof, 1999) and embodied forms of spirituality (Flory and Miller, 2007) – including the commercial appropriation of spirituality in place of religion (Carrette and King, 2005) – through to claims that the growth in spirituality is partly a consequence of a broader ‘subjective turn’ (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) or, indeed, that it must be understood within established networks of authority (Wood, 2009) and as a form of strategic capital in a wider religious field (Guest, 2007). Crucially, these considerations often turn upon an axis of individuality/spirituality and community/religion, as well as developing inevitable implications for debates relating to secularisation. While in many ways extensive, this growing interest in spirituality has invariably focused upon the New Age movement, paganism, holistic spirituality or certain Christian traditions. There has been little consideration of spirituality as a sociological concept for Islam. If we have seen a growth in spiritual practice, language and identity as a mainstay of the contemporary religious landscape in Britain and the United States, then a question arises about the implications of this for Muslims in a minority context – especially when issues relating to Islamic religious authority loom large in both academic and public discourse.

In this article I draw upon empirical research conducted with Muslim musicians in Britain, many of whom, as Sufis, reside on the frontiers of religious authority – that is, they

simultaneously remain within the ambit of Islamic knowledge and belonging, whilst nonetheless reimagining and rearticulating the tradition in ways that draw from postmodern notions of spirituality (by which I mean a hybrid and inclusive spirituality that transgresses normative religious boundaries). Consequently, whilst sociologists of religion have rightly defined spirituality as referencing inner-life experience and personalised beliefs relating to the transcendental (Flanagan 2007), we should avoid assumptions that this involves a movement away from organised religion. This is particularly evident within the context of Islam, which has often remained open to competing claims of authority and has permitted, if not encouraged, an 'interpretive anarchy' (Robinson 2009, 353). The musicians considered within this research are therefore firmly rooted in notions of collective religious practice, including membership of Islamic devotional groups (usually Sufi *tariqas*), and are fully engaged with highly-valued networks of Islamic scholarship. Yet, crucially, these musicians are still capable of framing their religious subjectivity through forms of language and conceptualisation that move in tandem with postmodern notions of spirituality.

In making this claim I draw upon the discourse produced by these musicians as they discuss the nature of their religious/spiritual and musical practice. First, Muslim musicians reproduce a particular linguistic and conceptual discourse of spirituality. This discourse relates to their belief and practise of Islam, but in emphasising inner-being and subjective experience it is often interchangeable with the metaphoric language of postmodern spirituality. Second, there are a number of Muslim musicians who consciously attempt to evoke universal (or at least trans-religious) themes and concepts within their music. Third, a disproportionate number of Muslim musicians have converted to Islam, generally after experiencing other religions or modes of spiritual practice. While they may finally have settled on their own interpretation of a satisfactory metaphysical truth, based on an Islamic theistic worldview, they nonetheless bring with them strong ideas relating to the notion of a spiritual journey and an inner-yearning for 'something more'. This is most likely strengthened by their identity as artists/musicians, with the creative process itself undoubtedly sympathetic to expressions of inner-life being and spiritual change.

It is important to consider how these discourses of subjectivity and spirituality are constructed from within organised Islamic communities. I correspondingly conclude the article with some remarks about the rise of modern Sufism and the role of spirituality as an important facet of expressive belief. I argue that these trends are consistent with wider theories of religious change in the UK – concerning the breakdown of religious hierarchy and the rise of individual agency in a religious marketplace – but that for Muslims in Britain these developments must nonetheless

be understood from the perspective of Islamic religiosity, belonging and communality. Set within this complex milieu, I suggest that spirituality is an important concept for Muslim musicians because it enables foundational Islamic beliefs to be expressed and understood in new contexts. More specifically, I make two claims about the role of spirituality. First, that 'spiritual capital' raises the artistic and religious profile of Muslim musicians, as well as generating new connections across the religiously diverse landscape of Britain. Second, that this spirituality is formed through clear notions of belonging and belief – and that the use of postmodern spirituality within an Islamic context is better understood as a form of 'expressive communalism' (Flory and Miller, 2007). It is a challenge to *traditional* forms of Islamic community and belonging in the UK, rather than a move towards detached individualisation.

Muslim musicians in Britain

In 2005/06 there was a sudden explosion of interest in the music produced by a small but growing number of young Muslims in the UK. The popularity of English-language 'Islamic pop music' had gradually been on the rise since it first emerged in the late-1990s, but it was in 2005 that British musician Sami Yusuf achieved worldwide success with the release of his multi-million selling album *My Ummah*. The recognition and support that arose for Muslim musicians – including attention from national media outlets – encouraged the rise of various Muslim musical sub-cultures into the public sphere, including most prominently *nasheed* (religious songs) and Muslim hip hop. While therefore characterised by a startling array of musical styles, these musicians were often connected through a shared public platform and the incorporation of faith within their music. They are also predominately characterised by some kind of connection to Sufism.

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted with many of these musicians in 2011-13. While a range of methods were used – including participant observation at events across the UK, a national online survey, and semi-structured interviews with twenty two of these musicians – the themes that I discuss in this article are largely taken from discourse analysis of interview and song material.

Generalising about this diverse 'musical scene' can be difficult, but it is useful to comment briefly on broad sociological features. The musicians who have penetrated the public sphere in some meaningful way tend to be ethnically diverse (more so than the wider Muslim demographic); geographically concentrated in major urban areas (particularly London); broadly represented by the professional class (many of the musicians work as teachers, youth workers, managers etc); and largely comprised of third/fourth generation Muslims, or converts, in their

twenties and thirties. While the picture is mixed, these musicians nonetheless possess the hallmarks of an emerging Muslim elite in Britain (Edmunds 2010; Waqar and Venetia 2010) – confident, educated and cosmopolitan – and are not always representative of a wider Muslim population that lacks access to certain forms of social capital.

Morris (2016) has theorised Muslim musicians in the UK understood through the categories of ‘Islamic music’ and ‘Islamically-conscious music’. According to this typology, Islamic music is characterised by a paraliturgical style that reinforces communal and religious identity via specific reference to shared Islamic histories, practice, language and belief – *nasheeds* most typically fall into this category. In contrast, Islamically-conscious music – while drawing from Islamic beliefs and values – more overtly attempts to universalise these influences for a wider audience (including non-Muslims), with a much greater emphasis on self-expression and individuality. As might be expected, the musicians who most clearly exhibit the type of spirituality discussed in this article are those whom would usually produce music described as ‘Islamically-conscious’. To provide background and texture to later discussions, it is useful to consider a sample of these musicians through vignettes of four groups from the research: Aashiq al-Rasul, Pearls of Islam, Silk Road and Poetic Pilgrimage.

Aashiq al-Rasul

Based in Birmingham, the prolific Aashiq al-Rasul perhaps typify the contemporary nasheed style. They incorporate extensive percussion and are influenced by Arab and South Asian-style drumming. With two percussionists – utilising a variety of membranophones, from an electric drum kit to the doumbek and tabla – their lyrics are often backed by music that incorporates interlocking or polymetric percussion instrumentation, handclapping, and humming. Their songs also include various recorded samples, from religious oratory through to natural sounds (such as the wind). In terms of musical influences, one of the group’s founders, Amran, has acknowledged an understanding of South Asian *ragas*¹, while another founder member, Usman, talks about influences stemming from rock, jazz and funk.

Pearls of Islam

Pearls of Islam is a London-based duo consisting of two sisters, both in their twenties and from an African-Caribbean background. The children of converts to Islam, Rabiah and Sakinah produce gentle, poetic music that incorporates a range of musical styles, including influences of nasheed, folk, soul and rap. Utilising instruments that include the guitar and a selection of membranophones – such as the djembe and doumbek – they cite extensive influences that range from the Malian heavy-blues group Tinariwen, to the roots-rock of the American musician Ben Harper. Through their lyrics they attempt to translate their Islamic beliefs into a universal

language of spirituality and morality, with the aim of achieving a wider resonance beyond the boundaries of a traditional Muslim collectivity.

Silk Road

A four-man, Birmingham-based group that – as they describe it – create ‘Sufi inspired acoustic folk-rock’. The group is ethnically diverse, with members that are varying of South Asian, Egyptian, Afghani and Anglo-Irish descent. Performing with two acoustic guitars, an electric bass guitar and a tabla, Silk Road produce music that comfortably draws from a popular tradition of folk-rock music while nonetheless drawing from an eclectic range of influences, including funk, Irish folk, West African and classical Indian music. Lyrically the band attempts to avoid direct references to Islam, instead preferring to more subtly integrate a selection of religious themes into their music.

Poetic Pilgrimage

Poetic Pilgrimage is an assertive hip hop and spoken word duo, based in London. The group consists of two female converts in their thirties, Sukina and Muneera, who are both from Bristol and of Jamaican heritage. Citing influences that include West African music, soul, jazz and reggae, Poetic Pilgrimage are particularly inspired by the socially-conscious hip hop movement of the 1990s – an American cultural and music tradition that includes hip hop musicians such as Mos Def, Common and Nas. With searing lyrics that tackle issues such as misogyny, global politics, faith and spirituality, Poetic Pilgrimage have made a deep and controversial impact on the Muslim music scene.

Religious belonging: Sufism in contemporary Britain

As one might expect, the Islamic tradition overwhelmingly pursued by the vast majority of Muslim musicians in Britain appears to be Sufism. Broadly speaking, the traces of extremely diverse Sufi thought and practice are not always easily identified in the UK. Geaves provides a fourfold typology of Sufism in Britain, suggesting that there are varying degrees of association with Sufism in the UK – including direct identification with Sufism, but also more subtle and even unconscious tracks of Sufi thought (Geaves 2000). The affiliation of the musicians participating in this research similarly spanned a spectrum of Sufi identity and belief, ranging from active membership of a *tariqah* through to attendance at a Sufi-inclined mosque. Whilst exhibiting strong postmodern spiritual tendencies – which will be detailed in the next section – these musicians nonetheless rooted their spirituality in active membership of an organised religious community/network. This sense of belonging and active membership correspondingly brings with it complex implications for religious, ethnic, cultural and musical identity. This is particularly

evident in the more established Sufi networks, several of which play a significant role for many of these musicians.

One such network is the Tijaniyyah order, a Sufi *tariqah* with particular influence in West Africa and increasingly followed by Muslims in Britain of an African or Caribbean ethnic heritage. Whilst certainly not confined to those with a self-conscious black identity, members of this Sufi *tariqah* nonetheless appear to be motivated somewhat by Afrocentric tendencies and membership entails something of a political as well as a spiritual outlook. The Tijaniyyah tradition has developed a presence in Britain, partly strengthened by the existence of a Tijaniyyah holy place in London. An important and influential leader of the Tijaniyyah order, Ibrāhīm Niass (b.1900), died at St Thomas' Hospital, London, in 1975. It was been claimed by one London-based Muslim musician (with a certain degree of local pride) that members of the Tijaniyyah order have been known to pray in this sacred space. The Tijaniyyah path has become central for the religious practice of many African-Caribbean Muslim hip hop musicians in the UK. Several of the musicians that were interviewed for this research had officially joined the order. These musicians are in regular and direct contact with the religious leaders of the Tijaniyyah order, based in Senegal, and are actively contributing to a Tijaniyyah network in London. Regular *zikr* circles, meditation sessions, and other forms of spiritual practice take place on a weekly basis at homes and private spaces across the city.

Another prominent Sufi tradition influencing Muslim musicians in Britain is the ethnically diverse Naqshbandi Haqqani order. The Haqqani order is well represented across, in particular, North America and Europe, with a highly visible internet presence that facilitates the recruitment of Sufi *mureed* (followers). The order has an important institutional presence in London, especially since the opening of the Centre for Spirituality and Cultural Advancement (CSCA) in February 2010. With strong links to many young Muslim social networks in and around the School of Oriental and African Studies, CSCA is an important driver of artistic and spiritual activity amongst Muslims in London. A clear manifestation of this activity is the Rabbani Project. Launched in 2012 by CSCA, the Rabbani Project aims specifically to support Sufi artistic networks by running events where poetry, music and other spiritual-cultural activities can take place. The Rabbani Project helped release a double-album, entitled, *Eternity: Music for the Soul*, featuring a range of Sufi musicians, including, amongst others, the British musicians Rakin Niass, Pearls of Islam and JKAS. A wide range of Muslim musicians have some kind of connection to the Naqshbandi Haqqani tradition. Five of the musicians interviewed during this research specifically mentioned their direct affiliation to the order, whilst several others have looser cultural, religious and social ties.

One of the primary implications of these organised Sufi networks is the extent to which they pull musicians together and generate a critical mass of dynamic cultural interaction. Muslim musicians have regular contact with one another through these networks – they collaborate and find a sense of belonging through membership. These networks are not exclusionary and boundaries between different Sufi orders are often porous. Foundations of knowledge and reasoning are often provided by an influential range of British and American Muslim scholars – across and beyond different Sufi networks – including Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad, Sheikh Babikir Ahmed and Sheikh Hamza Yusuf. It is perhaps more accurate to think about a Sufi-influenced artistic/musical movement, centred in London, drawing from a range of scholars both inside and outside specific *tariqahs*, and with extensive national and international influences. Such networks, then, are characterised by inherent features of religious belonging, cosmopolitanism and Sufi spirituality. It is from within these organised religious communities and networks that Muslim musicians in Britain are utilising the language and conceptual framework of postmodern spirituality to articulate their Islamic beliefs.

Muslim musicians and postmodern spirituality

Definitions and understandings of spirituality are notoriously elusive, relying as they do upon phenomena that are connected to often ineffable subjective experiences. One response has been to focus upon spiritual *practice* – this most prominently includes Heelas and Woodhead (2005) with their identification of the ‘holistic milieu’. Yet this locates spirituality in a particular place or set of activities, when it might be better understood as subjective inclinations that run through discursive formations of self-understanding. Considered in this way, spirituality becomes a form of relational epistemology – based on language and conceptual framing – that draws upon the internal and the ecstatic.

As Varga suggests, this outward orientation of the subjective is connected to individual agency in a postmodern context:

The (re)discovery of spirituality re-presents the individual’s effort to make conscious his or her ‘inner life’, that is, his or her personality and moral ideas. Contemporary spirituality therefore expresses several features of postmodern conditions, especially the possibility offered to the individual to shape his or her view of the world. It also makes possible for someone to join a spiritual or religious group that is rooted in a culture different to one’s own. (Varga, 2007, 145)

While this view of spirituality recognises that ‘postmodern conditions’ fundamentally shape the landscape of contemporary belief, this should not be reduced to a simple shift between different forms of identification and membership in a competitive marketplace of religion/spirituality. Rather than conceiving of spirituality as located in particular and competing cantons of belief, it

is possible to consider spirituality as a discourse of subjective belief that cuts across and is shared by a wide range of religious and spiritual traditions. It is this universalising language of postmodern spirituality and the desire to universalise – or perhaps more accurately *translate* – subjective experience that emerges most starkly when discussing religious belief and musical practice with Muslim musicians. There is a sense in which they utilise a language, orientation and conceptual currency that – while rooted in Islamic belief, Muslim belonging and Sufi spirituality – is interchangeable with wider discourses in the West relating to inner-being and the transcendent.

There are three features of this phenomenon. First, the language used in constructing and participating in this discourse of postmodern spirituality. Second, the conscious attempt to universalise and share their religious/spiritual experience, through their music, with a non-Muslim audience. Third, the potential influence of conversion to Islam (a disproportionate number of Muslim musicians are converts) and the notion of a spiritual journey that contributes directly to postmodern ideas of religious and spiritual change.

Certainly the most striking and immediate way in which contemporary notions of spirituality are visible in the worldview of Muslim musicians is through the language that they use to frame religious experience. ‘Spirituality’ itself is a word that frequently arose unprompted in the discourse deployed by Muslim musicians. It has been used specifically and consistently to reference internal and highly subjective ‘happenings’ of religious experience, as opposed to structured engagement with external religious practice or teaching. Less direct language included frequent evocation of emotion (including ‘love’ and ‘passion’), reference to inner change and development (including notions of ‘questing’ and ‘journeying’), and allusions to inner being (including ‘heart’ and ‘soul’). While many of these concepts have roots in the mystical tradition of Sufism – with its emphasis on practice that includes meditation and an ecstatic experience of the divine – these musicians, who have largely been born and brought up in the UK, have tended to frame this conceptualisation in language that is interchangeable with the wider discourse of spirituality. It was apparent that these concepts were deployed with inherent semantics of religion and were not meant to reference a spirituality existing beyond an all-encompassing Islam. Yet the language was clearly constructed through the application of universal tropes of subjectivity that translate, or perhaps make contiguous, Muslim religious experience with universalised notions of spiritual experience.

This conceptual framing furthermore extends into the very act of music making itself. When attempting to describe the act of performing – whether playing an instrument or singing – musicians frequently, and without prompting, directly raised the ‘spiritual’ nature of their

performance. Usman, the drummer for Aashiq al-Rasul, situated his performance within the context of Islam but stressed the deeply subjective, physically and emotionally visceral, performative act:

The way I strike a skin, obviously not being able to verbalise it or put it into words, but that whole action and the reason for that action, do you know what I mean? What I'm trying to say? So when I'm playing a bit of hand percussion, it's almost like where I'm coming from and how I'm trying to project myself, and what I feel, which is Islam, predominantly just pushing it, a spiritual force if you want to put it that way... it's what's coming from there [gestures to heart]. (Usman, October 2010, Birmingham)

Musicians furthermore discussed the connection that an intensely spiritual performance could create between themselves – as singular spiritual beings – and members of an audience. The bass player, Ash, from the folk-rock band Silk Road, tried to verbalise the spirituality that he often feels crackling through their performance:

...when we perform and when we become absorbed in what we're playing, then the room becomes absorbed, and that's when, that's when they share with us that upliftment. And it's not an upliftment in the sense of happy-go-lucky, giddy, it's deeper than that, it's more mahogany than ash, do you know what I mean? (Ash, October 2011, Birmingham)

One of Ash's fellow band members, Atallah, tried to expand on this theme:

People have come up to us after that gig and they had been affected spiritually... we were playing sometimes and I would feel very spiritually active, I would feel my heart had been affected, and so that's a good sign of connecting. (Atallah, October 2011, Birmingham)

While there is no doubt that these feelings of spirituality are rooted in their Islamic faith, there nonetheless appeared to be the identification of a spiritual 'connection' between these artists and members of their audience – an audience that is often constituted by a range of faith backgrounds. During our interviews and conversations, these musicians often discussed emotion through the language of universal spirituality, eschewing direct reference to Islam itself in order to emphasise the power of a potentially non-specific and shared spirituality.

A central and underlying aspect of this expressive spirituality is therefore *universality*. While not all Muslim musicians directly engage with a perceived universalism – and some musicians very much consider themselves artistic practitioners of a specifically Islamic tradition – all of the musicians interviewed for this research to some extent deployed a discourse of religious and spiritual universality. This approach is manifested most publicly by the globally-successful musician Sami Yusuf, with his rejection of the term 'Islamic pop' – a purposeful movement beyond direct references to Islam within his lyrics – and a rebranding of his music as 'Spiritique'. Discussing this self-labelled musical genre, Sami Yusuf explained 'Spiritique' in the following terms:

It incorporates and utilises Middle Eastern and Western harmonics, underpinned by spirituality. It's all-encompassing, all-inclusive... It will utilise music as a facilitator for spiritual appreciation, regardless of race and religion. (Yusuf, quoted in Tusing 2010)

While Sami Yusuf is the most successful Muslim musician in the UK to adopt this approach, two very different groups – Poetic Pilgrimage and Silk Road – similarly attempt to produce spiritually accessible music that reaches out beyond the usual boundaries of Islamic communality.

In 2010, Poetic Pilgrimage fascinatingly reworked the song, 'Satta Massagana', by the Jamaican reggae group, the Abyssinians². They have set the core musical sound of the original song into a modified strophic form³, backed by a steady hip hop pulse, and have directly quoted lyrics from the original chorus – creating a hip hop homage to the original, called 'Land Far Away'. The chorus line (common to both versions⁴) references a place away from the embodied world – an afterlife, perhaps, but tantalisingly vague – and refers to 'the book of life' – a scriptural source but possibly a holistic, experiential one. In our interview, Sukina, one half of the duo Poetic Pilgrimage, explained the power that a universal spiritual message can have when transcending specific religious traditions:

...the concept or what they're singing about, 'land far away', it was just so universal, you know, like, we believe in a land far away, where there's no night, only day. They say, look into the book of life, and that could be a Qur'an, a Bible, a Bhagavad Gita, you know what I mean, it could be a holy scripture. So kind of the fact that it referred to the scripture, to the book of life, that was wicked. It doesn't conflict with our beliefs, because the Qur'an is the book of life too and you'll see that there is a land far away, so it was just perfect and I think we wanted to talk about, about heaven, I suppose, or about a sacred place or a place away from conflict and pain and fear and war. (Sukina, February 2011, Cardiff)

For Poetic Pilgrimage, there is a powerful inclusivity in producing music that is relevant to their own identity as Muslims but nonetheless lyrically framed in language and concepts that speak beyond the typical bounds of Islam. This is not about downplaying Islam, or Muslim experience, but about opening it up and making it accessible to a wider audience.

The band, Silk Road, similarly stressed the centrality of a message that is universally spiritual but simultaneously underpinned by an Islamic worldview. This approach is reflected most powerfully through song semantics. Silk Road explained to me that they derive much of their inspiration directly from sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith – and from more eclectic sources, such as the Sufi poet Rumi – but then construct a lyrical form that has broader appeal. One of the classical guitarists in the band, Atallah, explained the specific inspiration behind two of their songs:

...there's one song called Ask My Heart, and it's the translation of a poem by a great Sufi Sheikh about the relationship between his heart and his spirit, in conversation... [and another] called The Stranger, it's actually based on a Hadith, [the Prophet Muhammad] said that the person in

life is like a traveller who stops under a tree for a while, knowing that he's got to go on... so this song is all about that, and it's about a person travelling in life. So it is enthused with spiritual overtones. (Atallah, October 2011, Birmingham)

Both of these songs have an occasional lyrical reference to Islam, but they largely attempt to deal with religious and spiritual themes that, while rooted in Islamic sources, can be accessed by an audience that might otherwise feel excluded from something overtly Islamic. Both songs consider the relationship of the individual with the transcendental and the divine, conjuring images that include spiritual light and the nature of our temporary journey through the physical world. Expanding on this, Ash, the bass player for the group, explained to me their motivation for a 'spiritually open' approach:

Something I think I can say on behalf of all of us is that it's more important for us to, while all the spirituality is certainly the core of our expression, through this medium, at the same time a lot of it is quite subtle and like, you know, like Atallah was explaining to you that's how the Hadith was translated and expressed through this song, because we don't really want to alienate the majority of audiences. We really want to do something for someone that hasn't got the linkages to the spirituality of Islam, can still take something good from it, and still relate to it on a personal level. (Ash, October 2011, Birmingham)

This approach, therefore, appears both to be natural and conscious, with the spirituality of the group 'oozing out' – as the lead singer, Faraz, described it – whilst they additionally craft lyrics in a form that speaks to an audience across and beyond any specific religion.

Beyond a self-conscious attempt to advance shared notions of religion and spirituality through their music, there is an additional reason why this approach comes naturally to some Muslim musicians. Namely, a disproportionate number of Muslim musicians are converts to Islam and this background correspondingly brings with it a unique set of experiences. The number of Muslim converts in Britain cannot be accurately confirmed, but converts potentially represent 3.3-3.7% of the total Muslim population in Britain (Brice, 2010). From a sample of forty four Muslim musicians producing music in the public sphere – a selection based on their seeming popularity and public visibility in various forms of media output – then fifteen of these musicians are converts. Muslim musicians, then, are more likely on average to have converted to Islam. This brings with it certain implications and causal explanations that are significant when we consider the manner in which these musicians articulate their faith.

One implication certainly seems to be a heightened sensitivity that these musicians display toward trans-religious concepts and notions of universal spirituality. The language of postmodern spirituality emerges more frequently amongst converts than it does with musicians who were raised in a Muslim family. In his study of Muslim converts in Colorado, Bowen (2009) suggests that change and movement are important underlying factors facilitating the conversion

process. I argue that ideas of religious and spiritual change are similarly entwined with the subjective experiences of Muslim convert musicians. These musicians frequently raised ideas relating to spiritual questing and journeying, their experiences fundamentally inflected by the 'spiritual journey' that they undertook during their conversion to Islam.

When attempting to explain how Islam now permeates his music, the hip hop artist, Mohammed Yahya, suggested that while his lyrics are not overtly 'Islamic', his worldview as a Muslim naturally and subtly emerges throughout the artistic process. Mohammed recounted his spiritual journey from Pentecostal Christianity through to Rastafarianism, Paganism and finally to Islam. The 'truth' of Islam was placed by Mohammed into a broader narrative of spiritual and epistemic change that clearly spanned a number of religions before reaching its more settled conclusion:

I guess, I do promote Islam in my music because my music is always a reflection of me, how I am as a person, so I try to, without wanting to, whatever I'm feeling inside, whatever my personal experiences are, you'll be able to hear that through the music. (Mohammed, February 2011, London)

Mohammed – and indeed other musicians that have converted to Islam – often seem to take their identity as a musician and utilise it as a connecting thread between their pre-Muslim identity and their current selves. For these musicians, their artistic nature is bound together with their spiritual openness and sensitivity. They stress the integral notion of change to their overarching identity – spiritually, religiously and artistically – and this perhaps encourages them to develop or deploy transferable concepts and language – a semiotic framework that is anchored to a fundamental understanding of themselves as spiritual, subjective beings. As I suggested earlier, they are not trying to suppress or downplay their Muslim identity, but, perhaps more accurately, they do attempt to find a common lexicon that will make sense of the entirety of their 'spiritual journey'.

For many of these converts, then, music falls easily into place as the most natural way to express a state of spiritual being and the nature of internal change. The entwined identities, of Muslim convert and musician, gently complement one another, enabling the ordering of a spiritual journey and a connection with those beyond a specific Muslim communality. Atallah, a white convert in his fifties, whose musical style is influenced by classical guitar playing and Irish folk music, fondly looked back at his spiritually-inclined generation, who were 'looking for something more' during the 1970s. He compared that generation of musicians – which included an array of converts to Islam – with today's talented but spiritually deficient musical culture:

...a lot of music nowadays, it's just about people's anguish. It may not be violent, but it's just about their internal anguish, and they say that the artists are actually painting their prison, and art isn't actually about describing the prison we're in, whereas spiritual music is actually painting

the world outside the prison [laughs]... There are some wonderful musicians now, singers like Bon Iver, I find it quite spiritual listening to them. But listening to the words, they are not singing about a religious experience, it's about songs for the pain, they're going into the depths in their hearts, but they haven't found, they're not connected... (Atallah, October 2011, Birmingham)

For Atallah and many other Muslim musicians – both converts and those who were Muslim at birth – there is a desire to inject a little spirituality back into the cultural mainstream. This necessitates a careful use of language and the framing of experience to transfer musical expression beyond a normalised notion of Muslim subjectivity to broader commonalities of postmodern spirituality. It is about making both music and Islam *spiritually accessible* for a wider audience.

Sufism, spiritual capital and expressive communalism

While theoretical definitions and explanations of spirituality are numerous, they often tend to be characterised by a dissolution of the traditional boundaries of religion through a process of subjectivization in late-modern society (Knoblauch, 2008). In many respects, this claim is consistent with the trends examined in this article – subjective/spiritual experience is pushing at the norms of traditional Islamic practice and reshaping the ways through which Muslim experience is understood in the UK. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that religious membership and belonging are neither threatened by, nor indeed inconsequential for, the spiritual experience/expression of Muslim musicians. Sufism in the UK is potentially a liminal space (Bhabha, 1994) – an occurrence of change on the periphery, simultaneously inside and outside normative notions of Islamic practice and belonging.

As Geaves (2014) has argued, we are seeing something of a resurgence of Sufism in the UK and across various transnational networks in the West. This revival is neither the imported Barelvi 'folk' Sufism of South Asia nor the Western esotericism of early converts. It is something new: a carefully modulated syncretism that is rooted in the Islamic sources of the Qur'an, Hadith and Sunnah, but articulated, organised and practised in a manner that draws on Sufi tradition and contemporary experiences of the West. We therefore see the maintenance of traditional forms of Islamic religious life with a religious revival that takes new forms, including discourses of spirituality, multi-ethnic and expansive networked organisations, various modes of cultural production, and the development of online Sufism (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2014).

The Muslim musicians outlined in this paper are very much at the forefront of this activity. This might be a natural adaptation to the liberalism of Western society (Phillips, 2009), but it is perhaps something that has more fundamentally been shaped by the social conditions of late-modernity. Linda Woodhead captured these changes rather neatly in a plenary address on 'New

Forms of Public Religion’, with a distinction between ‘old style’ and ‘new style’ religion, as outlined by Davie:

‘New style’ religion moves away from the medium-sized membership structure towards more episodic modes of existence. Some are very large (festivals of gatherings), and some are very small (cell groups); the latter can exist within the former. In ‘new style’ religion, moreover, authority is dispersed and communication takes place through a wide variety of media; the agency of the individual is considerably enhanced. The stress lies in finding yourself rather than in a definitive form of salvation. (Davie, 2015: 225)

Woodhead makes this distinction from a reading of religious change across Europe – based as this is on an understanding of hierarchical and nationally-conceived churches – and it therefore only maps partially across on to our understanding of Islam (which has historically always lacked hierarchical structure and centralised religious authority). Nonetheless, the comparative trends are worthy of consideration and it can be argued that third and fourth generation Muslims in Europe are moving away from their own version of ‘old religion’ – that is, they are reshaping an ethnically-conceived and culturally-proscribed understanding of Islam. Sufism represents a new frontier in this shifting landscape, with Salafism and Islamism also each respectively a leading edge of change (Hamid, 2014). While these Islamic movements/trends each represent a different late-modern response and approach to the ‘old religion’ of ‘cultural Islam’, for Sufism, which places an emphasis on inclusivity and the immanent, spirituality is naturally adopted as a central concept within this process. I argue that there are two principle ways in which we can theorise the role of spirituality within this context – as a form of spiritual capital and as a version of ‘expressive communalism’ (Flory and Miller 2007).

While the concept of spiritual capital has been explored in different ways (Baker & Smith, 2010; O’Sullivan & Flanagan, 2012) it most often theorises spirituality as a form of social capital that draws from the celebrated work of Bourdieu (1991) and Putnam (2000). This seminal work hardly needs an introduction. Bourdieu discussed ‘religious capital’ as a means through which individuals jostle for power within the field of religion; Putnam analysed bridging properties, suggesting that social capital has the potential to generate contact with those outside our everyday sphere of activity. For Muslim musicians, then, within an artistic, Sufi and wider spiritual milieu, spiritual capital can be seen to operate in a way that resembles both of these understandings. The prestige, significance and success of their music is enhanced by an externalisation of their spirituality through language, sound and performance. When infused with spiritual undertones their music is perceived as containing something of transcendent value that resonates with a range of audiences (religious, spiritual and Islamic). In the terms laid down by Bourdieu, then, we can see spirituality as a feature of *habitus* within overlapping

religious/spiritual/Islamic fields. Building on this trans-religious appeal, spiritual capital can additionally serve to generate connections across traditional boundaries of belonging, with musicians prioritising spirituality as a way of reaching out to new audiences and religious/spiritual groups. In both instances, spiritual capital possesses distinct features that distinguish it from traditional notions of religiosity: it is an inclination that finds traction in multiple contexts, acting as capital across different social fields – Muslim and non-Muslim – and enabling new forms of connection. It is a malleable concept that works for Muslim musicians by simultaneously enabling a form of *da'wah* (Islamic proselytization), artistic hybridity, and a broader discourse of values and belief.

Despite this seemingly individualistic and transgressive approach to spiritual activity, British Muslim musicians nonetheless remain anchored to a clear understanding of religious belonging. Exploring the spiritual does not involve an erasure of the religious. Rather, for Muslim musicians, attempting to express the immanence of the spiritual is a way of articulating the transcendent reality of the religious. Thus, Islamic scripture and knowledge become synthesised with Sufi practice and communal activity, before finding expression through music, poetry and spiritual discourse. The individualism of art, spirituality and expression is therefore buttressed by a central pillar of Islamic belief and communality – something that is evident from the centrality of modern Sufi networks and the new wave of prominent English-language religious scholars in Britain and America. This resonates with the notion of ‘expressive communalism’ discussed by Flory and Miller, where ‘the individual spiritual quest is mediated through the communities in which they are active and in which they seek membership and a sense of belonging’ (2007, 216-217). So too with British Muslim musicians – and Western Sufis more widely – whose spiritual seeking entails the formation/joining of religious and spiritual communities that remain in tight orbit around the central truth of Islamic revelation.

Conclusion

While Islam has always been marked by scholastic disagreement over authorised knowledge and practice, there is nonetheless an orthodox or normative middle-ground that shapes the religious lives of most Muslims. Sufism has sometimes pushed beyond those norms; Muslim musicians more so, with the use of music itself contested through some interpretations of the Hadith. We must therefore be mindful about not using these findings to generalise too broadly or recklessly. Muslim Musicians in the UK reside on the frontiers of Islamic belonging and authority, so to some extent their activities might be considered irrelevant for understanding change on a societal level. Yet it is possible at the very least to speculate about the implications of these

findings for Muslims in Britain – particularly when we consider that Muslim musicians are public figures with disproportionate influence relative to their numerical insignificance.

The centrality that spirituality has assumed for successful Muslim musicians in the UK, then, might point toward a broader trend or inclination. The picture is one of an emerging Muslim professional and middle-class that is reforming notions of Islamic engagement in the public sphere. Ethnically or religiously bounded conceptions of Islam are challenged by cosmopolitan and inclusive tendencies – agency reasserts itself against structure, ‘new religion’ in place of ‘old religion’. Yet neither are these changes idiosyncratic or societally insignificant, for they take place within the context of shifting organisational and scholarly debates for Muslims in Britain. The strengthening of modern Sufi networks and the influence of a new generation of Islamic scholars – most especially on the young and the educated – ensures that individual agency is supported by a groundswell of scholarly religious revival in Britain. Musicians are at the forefront of this change – acting as important public figures with a unique and often powerful cultural reach – and will no doubt continue to exert their influence upon the fluid context of Islamic practice and belief within the UK.

Notes

1. Deriving from the Sanskrit word for ‘colour’ or ‘hue’, a *raga* is a melodic mode used in Indian classical music.
2. The Abyssinians are a Jamaican reggae group that formed in 1968. An influential group in the reggae scene, they are known for their promotion of Rastafarianism, and ‘Satta Massagana’ is occasionally sung as hymn, partly in Amharic, during Rastafarian services.
3. ‘Modified strophic form’ refers to a semi-repeating musical structure – in this instance a looped sample.
4. ‘There is a land far, far away, where there’s no night, there’s only day. Look into the book of life, and you will see that there’s a land far, far away.’ (The Abyssinians (1976), ‘Satta Massagana’/Poetic Pilgrimage (2010), ‘Land Far Away’).

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