Current Issues in Islam

Everyday Life Practices of Muslims in Europe

Erkan Toğuşlu (ed.)

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Everyday Life Practices of Muslims in Europe

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Erkan Toğuşlu

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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

1. Everyday Experiences, Moral Dilemmas and the Making of Muslim Life Worlds: Introductory Reflections  
   *Thijs Sunier  
   9

## Part I: Consumption and Food Practices

2. Islamic Food Practices in a Migration Context: An Ethnography Among Moroccan Women in Milan (Italy)  
   *Elsa Mescoli  
   19

3. “Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you what you are.” The Literal Consumption of Identity for North African Muslims in Paris (France)  
   *Rachel Brown  
   41

   *Valentina Fedele  
   57

5. Politics of Consumption: The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaign and “Being” Muslim in Tower Hamlets  
   *Jana Jevtic  
   75
Part II: Individualization, Courtship and Leisure Practices

   Mohammed El-Bachouti

7. The Self-Arranged Marriage: Modern Muslim Courtship Practices in the Netherlands
   Leen Sterckx

8. Sexual Subjectivities in a Transnational Social Field: The Family Visit
   Wim Peumans

9. Halalscapes: Leisure, Fun and Aesthetics Spaces Created by Young Muslim Women of the Gülen Movement in France and Germany
   Sümeyye Ulu Sametoğlu

Part III: Translocal Space and Artistic Expressions

10. Artistic Reactions to Contemporary Controversies Related to Islam
    Diletta Guidi

11. (Dis)locating Muslims in Britain Today
    Ajmal Hussain

12. Towards a German Mosque: Rethinking the Mosque’s Meaning in Germany by Applying Socio-Semiotics
    Ossama Hegazy

Conclusion

    Erkan Toğuşlu

About the Authors

Introduction - The Location of Muslims

For anybody travelling down the A34 Stratford road into Sparkbrook from Birmingham city centre; you cannot miss the multicultural of the area. As you cross the Camp Hill roundabout, which joins a number of major routes in and out of the city, traffic is suddenly forced into a single lane, causing cars and pedestrians to creep along at a sort of spectator’s speed.

The three-storey Victorian shop fronts on both sides of the street appear well-worn as a result of decades of short-term rents and changing uses. This area was home to the working classes who served the industrial revolution in the 19th century, and subsequently to various swathes of immigrants – largely from the ex-colonies in South Asia and the Caribbean – who came to resuscitate Britain’s economy in the post-war years (Jones 1967). The various trades now going on here serve the needs of contemporary newcomers from increasingly more places like Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somaliland, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Algeria, Kurdistan, Syria, Iraq, Ethiopia, The Congo.

Half a mile further down the road the imprint of earlier post-war immigration is visible in a more settled form. The shops change hands less frequently and cater to regular needs, pointing to the presence of an almost homogenous economy made up of clothes shops, takeaways and immigration solicitors, constituting what some might call an enclave economy. This part of the area is more representative of the wider demography of Sparkbrook, which is steeped...
in a chequered history of immigration and race relations. The history reaches back to the 1960s as captured in studies such as the classic Race, Community and Conflict by Rex and Moore. This and subsequent works such as Dahya (1974) on Pakistanis in the area presented recently arrived immigrant groups to a rapidly declining part of Birmingham through a Weberian class analysis; setting them up as ideal types (Solomos and Back 1995: 23).

The tradition thus attached to this locality is one of a geographical place defined by the settlement of immigrants who are predominantly Asian. This tradition is cemented by the “facts” of the “Asian community” symbolized in the character of the high streets, eastern themed street furniture and places of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim worship (Dudrah 2002; Nasser 2005). The interface between Sparkbrook and the rest of the City is managed by “community” organizations; politics that run along clan lines and the commodification of Asian cuisine and clothing, creating a local Asian identity that is compatible with a UK multiculturalism that views culture and community in ethnically bounded ways.

Sparkbrook today is one of Birmingham’s most densely populated areas, and with the largest number of Muslims of the city’s forty wards (in the 2011 census there were 23,054 Muslims, 72% of the ward population). The urban backdrop that is the location of Muslims here is significant historically as the place many immigrants made their home upon arriving in the UK. It is also the place where subsequent generations of Muslims (including myself) grew up. These histories and their legacies produce on the surface a racialized urban imaginary – above and beneath which Muslims today are to be located.

In this chapter, I want to look beyond such regular facts about Muslim presence in cities like Birmingham. Recognizing that cities across Europe are important sites of settlement and habitation for sizeable numbers of Muslims – in Britain, the overwhelming majority of Muslims reside in cities. Yet in much of the policy and academic discourse the city is invariably taken as incidental in the lives of Muslims. Popular wisdom holds that Muslims, who were previously recognized as immigrants or Asians in Britain, are to be situated according to old Chicago School logics where, as a minority group, they occupy specific spatial and class positions; on the margins of cities and outside notions of secular liberal public life. Such wisdom privileges the symbolic, in which the stuff of Muslim life is linked to a conception of religion ordered round institutions, beliefs and rules rather than other modes of experience. The limited work on Muslims in Birmingham testifies to this, being centred on institutions such as the mosque, religious figures and the enactment of rituals among Pakistanis and Mir Puris.

We know from literature on the new urbanism that life in contemporary cities is about much more than built forms and spatial organizations of people and structures. Rather, it involves global connections and interactions of people and things across cultures, times and spaces (Amin & Thrift 2002). This implies, then, that Muslim life in cities like Birmingham is projected through much more than bodies and symbols like mosques, minarets, immigrants and niqabs. The social facts of Muslim presence in cities like Birmingham, across times and modes of presence – from immigrants to second/third generations – present a different surface of Muslim life, one not entirely composed of materials symbolic of Muslims and Islam, but also of feelings, moods and affective dispositions generated through the urban rituals of everyday Muslim life.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out with Muslims from different ethnic groups in inner-city Birmingham (UK) I will try to show how Muslims exist in an iterative relationship with the area, its histories, infrastructures and associated regimes of categorization and control that are often hegemonic in discussions about them. The context of Sparkbrook is not merely incidental as the location for my ethnography, but becomes a resource for understanding and situating Muslim identities in a contemporary British city. The context, briefly glimpsed above, is one that is produced or made by a number of forces and is then assembled by Muslims day-to-day lives.

In particular I draw on ethnographic data collected from multiple times spent at the Hubb – an “alternative Muslim-led arts space” – to reveal how the area is full of surfaces – historic, present, gendered, bodily, sensory and conflicting – on which Muslims can be located. And how through spending time with Muslims at the Hubb, observing and being part of the cultural production there, it is possible to sense how Muslim identity is assembled through a range of affective dispositions, in this case invoked through art. My discussion moves through the area – as the site of conspicuous Muslim presence – gathering various materials in the form of histories, buildings, memories, myths, metaphors, peoples, symbols and political happenings, to “rig up” (Simone 2011) a conception of Muslim subjectivity and collectivity as it is lived everyday on the ground.

This approach also amounts to a “radical contextualization” (Keith 2005: 109) of the area, which uncovers or is sensitive to different aesthetics, political articulations and knowledges of what goes on in Muslim Birmingham across spaces and times of Muslim settlement in the City, offering possibilities for
thinking about how the area plays host to different identities and communities in the making.

The focus on observing religion as it is lived, in process or as “religion abounds” (de Vries 2008: 7), enables one to gain a different sense of what Muslim identity and community might entail. The assemblages that I envisage involve elements and forms of religion in 21st-century Birmingham that are more prominent and less identifiable than the elementary forms of religious life that have been the preoccupation of studies and polices on Muslims in Birmingham to date.

The Hubb

The Hubb is described by its manager, Ali, as a “Muslim-led alternative arts space”. I was introduced to Ali through Sajid whom I befriended on a pilgrimage to Hajj in 2005. At the time of my research, Sajid was living in Sparkbrook and worked for a national arts organization. He was collaborating with Ali on projects under a broad banner of “Arts and Islam”. Sajid and I had arranged to meet at an event he had organized entitled Islam, Hip Hop and Social Change, which took place at the Drum, Birmingham’s most popular Black arts venue. Here I was introduced to Ali, who then invited me to the first meeting of the Hubb’s management committee in July 2009. At that meeting I befriended a number of other people including Abdul Wakeel, Aliya and Maryam, who later let me spend time with...
them inside and outside the Hubb, behind the scenes of their events and at them too.

A flyer for a local event.

The Hubb occupies the first floor of a recently re-located charity shop within a block of run-down period properties. The block sits on a busy interchange of roads marking one end of Birmingham’s “balti triangle”; something this area has been famous for since the 1980s.

Aerial view of the Hubb. Image taken from Google Earth.

The space was set up by Abdul Wakeel in May 2009. He runs the charity shop downstairs. Abdul moved to the area in the 1970s following a number of years doing relief work in northern areas of Pakistan, where he also became a Muslim. Abdul Wakeel recounted one of his early encounters with Muslims already in the area during the 1970s:
“I used to come down here to Edward Rd for zikr. There was a Yemeni Zawayyi, but the Yemenis had stopped using it as a Zawayyi; it became just for eating and for watching telly. Me and Abdul Nour revived it.”

This was the beginning of a long relationship Abdul Wakeel would go on to have with the local Yemeni community. He would facilitate links for them with charity work back in the Yemen, in return they would enable him access to cheap office and building space in the local area. The Hubb was one such outcome where relations of sociability among early Yemeni settlers and a white Muslim convert came together in the contemporary moment to shape the ground on which new formations of Muslim identity and community play out. The very physical fact of the Hubb – how it came about and who enabled it – thus, speaks a different story from the narrative about community in this area.

The building, its location, how it is configured and the materials inside it give off a particular atmospheric. There is one entrance on the side that faces the main Stratford road. The shutter is not always up, but only when a public event is on or sometimes when Ali and the volunteers are working inside.

As one ascends the narrow and steep stairway, there is an immediate feeling of a sense of separation from the noise and smell of the busy street behind. The cosmic colour and chemical smell of spray paint on the walls leading all the
way up combine with the steepness and the cheap carpet on the treads to make entering the space an almost dangerous effort.

At the top the space is entered through a door that requires little effort to open. So the momentum one gathers walking up the steep stairs, resisting yet taken in by the monotone colour and smell of spray can paint, leaves the visitor with a rush that the space quickly absorbs.

Despite the colourful, fresh and new nature of the art inside, the space is of little economic or material value. The first floor of this run-down terraced building whose rents are well below market rates for the area was converted into a small intimate gathering space by Ali and a group of volunteers over the space of a couple of weeks. The value of the space is realized when it becomes inhabited, from the intensities that are generated as various bodies, arts and things that go on inside come together. The resultant “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) of bodies results in a “situated multiplicity” that Amin (2008) aptly describes as the orchestrated coming together of various components – human and non-human – to generate a collective urban space and culture with its own social ethos.

Religion operates here, but not in the universal sense that we are accustomed to knowing it vis-à-vis Muslims and Islam. There is none of the furniture, the
striction and the embodied personalities we would associate with a religious space. There are no codes or ordinances that would make you think you are at a ceremony. Yet, a certain conception of religion organizes the place, informing how people rub up against each other, cautiously observing unwritten and unspoken etiquettes. Here, religion plays out in a popular way. There is a distinct absence of organization, no rules on the walls or health and safety notices, no fire exit signs, no “please don’t lean against the glass” or “please do not touch” signs. The space functions according to a sort of Nomos.

The space at once encapsulates and goes beyond representations of Muslims that are hegemonic in Birmingham. While the area and the building echo the racialized urban imaginary of the area, they are also the limit of this too. What goes on inside takes you beyond. The art plays in and with these representations in order to resonate. It is firmly located in the experiences of different ethnic groups in the area and the history of diaspora, but it also expands the boundaries of ethnicity. Different sentiments toward ethnic ‘community’ are generated from the cultural production that takes place inside, and in the context of power structures, being located in the racialized history of Sparkbrook. The space mediates a relationship to being Muslim in the city; it makes available a distinct experience that is long and rooted:

“It’s not something you would normally see in Sparkbrook but it was good, it was an interesting experience. I mean Ali, he brings quite a lot of diverse people there and it’s very close to my house. I do tend to go there quite a lot, it’s not the kind of Muslims that you would normally see in that end either... nowadays the majority of people that live around there are workers, factory workers so it’s good, it’s something different it’s something that I wouldn’t normally see” (Jalal, Sparkbrook resident & local activist).

“The Hubb is a fusion of modern and historical Islam, not cultural, historical. Islam was all about arts, expression was through poetry, through architecture, through beautiful patterns and designs and symmetries and this is what The Hubb represents, what Islam used to be, so it’s a revival of art. And it’s a safe space; it’s an open and inviting space. People can come and they know what to expect and they always take away some food for thought. I always feel that whatever events Ali does, he gives people something to take away with them, to be inspired by” (Aliya, event organizer).
Muslim Art, Deviant Art?

The Hubb hinges on the iconography of a particular art form – graffiti. The distinct semantic and linguistic system associated with graffiti, particularly New York subway graffiti, is blended with Arabic script and contemporary political slogans to make it less obscure and accessible to anyone looking. This may be a response to criticisms about the place of graffiti art in Islam or just a transgressive act that seeks to alter the surrounding space (Tonkiss 2005). Either way, the juxtaposing of linguistic styles suggests it is not coming from faith alone, but is a hybrid formation. Ali, the resident graffiti artist and manager of the Hubb, recounted his journey from having a fragmented relationship to the city – painting walls around Sparkbrook and neighbouring Small Heath – to becoming established in the Hubb, which now houses his graffiti art. Ali particularly celebrates this by claiming that the Hubb challenges impressions of graffiti as a problem or as a deviant act:

“...the way I used to work is not the way I work now and I might have been one of those who would cut and paste a wall into its location. With little regard to how the environment fits to the mural. Now when I paint something I think the location is crucial; the colours around it, the environment it sits in to merge with that piece. Graffiti is not designed to complement that space. Graffiti was an act of rebellion so graffiti murals in any city were always an act of rebellion so were never designed to sit in harmony with their environment, it’s actually saying the opposite. It’s designed to scream and say look at me now, it’s supposed to shout, the aggression is part of graffiti. So therefore a lot of these murals they scream out at you and I started to become disillusioned even with my own work and how these murals were just in complete conflict with the space that they’re sat in. So now what I try and do is... I want the murals that I paint to complement the space”.

Ali challenges the idea that graffiti involves no communication or dialogue with its audiences. He talks up the discursive qualities of his art, how it speaks political messages to people. In contrast to civic monumental art that seeks to engender public cultural solidarity, Muslim art at the Hubb works on different visceral registers to draw in people and then invade their psyche.

Laura Marks (2010) offers an ontology of the affective dispositions in Islamic Art that is useful for understanding the affective qualities of art at the Hubb.
Drawing on the Deleuzian model of enfoldment, Marks suggests that Islamic artworks are computed with three levels of understanding: infinity, information and image. Each of these represents a different layer that in turn relates to a virtual, code and actual world respectively. The art imagery carries within it a code that is enfolded infinity (in this case religion as the message of God). Or, to put it the other way, infinity (representing God, religion) unfolds into code, which unfolds into image (or the vernacular of the art form) (Marks 2010: 14).

Drawing on Marks’ distinction between that which is zahir (surface) and batin (hidden, enfolded) in Arabic we can interpret the affect generated by the art in the Hubb, as it goes beyond being a gallery type space to one that draws people into its making, and the making of their selves too.

The social and cultural rituals, then, of Muslims at the Hubb reveal a more complex notion of religion. The different layers of significance – God, the script, the wider city and society, the local community, concerns about the global Muslim ummah – point to a conception of religion much broader than faith as represented in policy, politics and community studies. The urban rituals precipitated by the Hubb point to an expanded sense of Muslimness that is inter-subjective, playing out across generational, ethnicized and denominational sensibilities. People come here and realize what worldly things, materials and technologies can be blended and mixed with Islam.

The Hubb: A Counterpublic?

The Hubb stages a confrontation between different traditions of Black and minority ethnic (BAME) life in the city. It is not straightforwardly a space of younger people that could lend credence to the idea of it representing a cultural clash between older and younger generations of immigrants and their children. Such a view of contemporary Muslim life was popularized in the TV serial “Citizen Khan”, also based on Muslims in Sparkbrook.

There is much that points to the reality being otherwise. The space was set up by a white Muslim convert seen locally as an elder. It also relies on the patronage of Yemeni elders for much of its running costs. The forces that order this space are, thus, many. They involve the history and legacy of the area, situated as they are in the buildings characteristic of the area and BAME histories that are folded into these.
This mural, painted by Ali around the corner from the Hubb, seeks to present the trajectory of Muslim-becoming in the area and city. Adorning the perimeter fences of a crumbling metal works site, the right hand side captures immigration and the life of Muslims as workers in the city’s metal industries, of which a famous outlet was the Birmingham Small Arms (BSA) foundry about a mile south-east from here. Further right the mural signals the importance of “Balti”, which is supposed to signify an element of the commodification of south Asian “culture” in the area. The Mural is sited in the heart of Birmingham’s “Balti Triangle”, which now hosts a more mixed economy, including new businesses catering for Muslim lifestyles and halal produce. The Mural also features a sign displaying “halal” next to “cakes” and “juices”, which represents a new aesthetic amid the established ethnic entrepreneurship of the area. The left hand side of the mural registers more boldly the salience of Muslims in this area and city more widely, represented in the image of a Mosque juxtaposed against a cityscape.

Social and cultural practices associated with the Hubb offer moments and tools for reflection on Muslims’ presence across time and space. The reflection connects them and others from across the city and across generations and histories. These reflections register feelings, words, thoughts and noises that transmit the tradition of black and Asian presence in the city. This is important as it is presenting here a new version of being Muslim or believing in Islam that is not associated with spectacular accounts that abstract Muslims from historical and spatial locations of their being. The r-o-u-t-e that tradition follows here, making its way into contemporary Muslim lives (not determining them), is suggestive of the social practice facilitated by a public space such as the Hubb (Calhoun 1993).

The aesthetics also give off a “sense experience”. For Meyer (2008) sensational forms can also be applied to material religious objects that address and involve
people. Following Amin (2008) too, for whom public or collective culture is about more than social interaction, this mural creates a cartography using images that make people’s minds travel. This induces a sense experience that encapsulates the past in terms of arrival and struggle, and mixes it with innovation, now. The idea is to provoke thinking and a sense of who Muslims are. In doing so, the creators and sponsors of this mural are espousing a new ethic that seeks to decouple the Muslim from structures that have determined him – politics of representation – to turn back to himself.

Today Muslims negotiate this history and the area, remaking it in a way that draws elements of the past into an ethical imperative – ensuring connections with the old while creating space for the new. This playing into earlier histories of BME presence in the city helps to create a “patterned ground” (Amin 2008:12) that enables people to situate themselves within it contemporaneously.

“I think Asian communities have been too insular-looking, but the war on terror has thrust us into the limelight. It’s given us the opportunity to talk about things like Jihad and women in Islam. The fact that we’ve got places like the Hubb and in Sparkbrook makes it safer for us to engage with these issues” (Aliya).

Paintings, sounds, the spoken word and smells of confectionery combine to create feelings of togetherness. These events are crafted cleverly to bring together eclectic styles, substances and vernaculars that go beyond what is recognizably Muslim in the City.

This space is not only a new representation of where Islam can be found and where Muslims live, but it also gives rise to new forms of religious experience. Believers or people just curious about Islam gather, spectate and network. Yet, the public being cultivated in this space is unmistakably a Muslim one. Although the space changes in its configuration and in the art installations and events going on inside, this state of flux is not an open one. It is oriented and circumscribed by a Muslim ethos. It is a place where different ethnicities, styles and persuasions meet and intersect to produce convivial culture. Artists and genres come from outside the Muslim tradition and from different faiths too.
Affective Community

There is a tension among people within this space. There is a subconscious refusal to accept the “arbitrary closure” that associations with the area have on local people’s identity. As with the “necessary fiction” that Hall (Hall & Back 2009) alludes to when talking about identity politics, people invoke Sparkbrook but never let it determine them. They ensure the local area appears in their narratives but also ensure they leave space within this for other references too.

Affective sensibilities and dispositions that people generate and experience in the Hubb are key dimensions to being Muslim in a 21st-century British city, where the experience of citizenship involves movements and networks that traverse ethnic boundaries and identity lines drawn from post-colonial inheritances. While the building and the area are inescapable backdrops that iterate metaphors of racialized presence in the city, they figure harmoniously, indeed are appropriated in the narrative of Muslim making here. This is not the case when it comes to the figure of the community leader; also a traditional site in the politics of identity in Birmingham. The role of Muslims such as community representatives or spokespeople from mosques, who participated in what people saw as the public life of the city, was viewed critically by all the artists I interacted with at the Hubb. They saw the official public sphere as inclusive of only certain Muslim sensibilities and politics, largely those enacted in a way that represented religion in a domesticated or personalized fashion.
The building, the area, bodies within it and the art that adorns it also combine to create a sphere of critique to challenge the existing multicultural settlement and its accommodation of Muslims. Art and technology are often fused into a medium less controversial, tainted and more accessible than community and identity politics. Just as the media act as an intermediary that helps to fashion links between people, ideas and expressive forms (Meyers & Moors 2004), art at the Hubb, the artists and the events these create facilitate a new practice of Muslim “community”.

Amin and Thrift (2013) highlight the importance of affective politics, where “politics is shot through with emotions” (2013: 157) and social action is about more than reason or deliberation, but also feeling and caring. This is apparent in the structures of feelings in people’s statements and in the art produced and consumed at the Hubb. These include commitments to diversity, respect and resonance with the heritage of immigration and the struggles faced by their parents’ generation, rather than straightforward dismissals of out-dated “ethnic culture” (although I heard these too occasionally). These feelings and emotions were expressed in banal ways, most fascinatingly in how bodies and space became affectively intertwined at the Hubb. The space produces social effects; it facilitates encounters that invoke different feelings. It facilitates a certain kind of practice of mediation, through organizing relations between exploring subjects via particular sensational forms that invoke feelings, thinking, reflection and believing. Religion is, after all, an affective formation (Amin & Thrift 2013: 173).

The confidence I felt expressed in the political stance of new Muslims through social and cultural practices at the Hubb, where they adopted a less antagonistic and more agonistic approach (Mouffe 2005), is a response to shifts in the broader cultural and political climate for religion in the contemporary world. In a moment when debates about the importance or resurgence of religion abound, alongside questions about the secularization theses where the divide between profane and sacred worlds is questioned through the figure of the Muslim, there are renewed spaces and conceptual arenas opened where religion and social life are able to be discussed. Jurgen Habermas points to this in a recent observation that developed societies (by which he means the west), when confronted with their pasts, and their “blind spots” that have prevented space for hearing other discourses, are now being forced to take new perspectives (Mendieta 2010).

In this changed terrain Muslims espouse a new ethic, one that seeks to decouple the figure of the Muslim from structures that have determined it – politics of representation – and to turn back to itself. Therefore, a new orientation for
Muslims and for community is envisaged. The coordinates of this are many and articulated differently and variously by people in my study. While Habermas might consider this reflexivity to be part of the trajectory of modernization and, therefore, western by virtue, my study reveals Muslims enacting this through traditions and conventions that were equally distant from modernity. For example, the regular halaqah that women set up and attended to discuss religion in a way that they perceived to be “traditional”.

Conclusion

The history and organization of BAME presence in cities like Birmingham present a picture of segregated settlement and life marginal to that of the city as a whole. Certain imaginaries about minority ethnic life surface as a result of the cartographies of settlement as read off census data, landmark and spectacular events in the city, as well as patterns of political representation in which identity politics dictate the terms and discourses of minority groups’ presence. Yet the way Muslims inhabit the city through creating connections and being visible and heard through social and cultural practices disrupt this received wisdom. Places, memories and frames of representation and governance are folded into new
formations of belonging and non-belonging that speak a new sense of minority subjecthood.

I have tried to show how the operative power of ethnicity and “community” in policy and political practice is also challenged and transgressed by different generations, genders and ethnic groups in their everyday actions. In this chapter I have drawn on the Hubb, as a place that materializes different ways in which Muslim identity and collectivity are felt and situated as practice. What binds people together, in this case Muslims, is not an assumed idea of culture derived from ethnicity, but an assemblage of social, cultural and affective practices that produce relations between different ethnicities, generations and collectivities in the same area and beyond. The resultant relationality – sutured through art, imagery and the spoken word playing on different visceral registers – transgresses the practices of identity politics with its interpersonal dealings or representational regimes that have been hegemonic in places like Sparkbrook. In everyday Muslim life in Sparkbrook minority ethnic histories are folded with new affects, which in turn unfold new ways of relating to the area and, therefore, of being Muslim.

Notes
2 Translated into Arabic (and Urdu) this term means to invoke or remember. It is also used, as it is here, to describe a collective session where individuals gather and spend time often repeating utterances that invoke God. The purpose sometimes is to enter into a trance-like state.
3 This term refers to a form of brotherhood among Sufis and is commonly associated with North Africa and Iran. Zawiyya is also used to describe a physical space where such brotherhoods meet.

References


