

# Finding Muslim Partners, Building Islamic Lives: Young South Asian Muslims at Home and in the Diaspora

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> till Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> of November 2010

Cardiff University School of History, Archaeology and  
Religion



## Conference Programme

<b>Friday 5<sup>th</sup> November 2010</b>		
1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m	Coffee and Snacks	
2:00 p.m. to 2:15 p.m	Welcome and Housekeeping	Dr. Santi Rozario
2:15 p.m. to 3:15 p.m	<i>Modernist Islam in Bangladesh and the UK: The Background to Our Study</i>	Prof. Geoffrey Samuel
3:15 p.m. to 3:45 p.m	Refreshments	
3:45 p.m. to 4:45 p.m	Film: <i>Every Good Marriage Begins with Tears</i>	
4:45 p.m. to 5:30 p.m	Discussion	
7.30 p.m. onwards	Dinner at MezzaLuna 159, City Road, Cardiff CF24 3BQ 029 2047 2771	

<b>Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2010</b>		
9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m	<i>Islamic Marriage: A Haven in an Uncertain World</i>	Dr. Santi Rozario
10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m	<i>'Marry into a Good Family': The Changing Meanings of Transnational Family Capital and Muslim Identity for Young Bangladeshi Muslims of the Diaspora</i>	Dr. Nazli Kibria
11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m	Refreshments	
12:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m	<i>Marriage, Partnership and 'Islamic Life': Case of British Bangladeshi Youth</i>	Bulbul Siddiqi
1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m	Lunch	
2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m	<i>Religion, Aesthetics and Self-Presentation: Profiles of Muslim Women on Match-Making Websites'</i>	Dr. Anna Piela

3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m	<i>Graduating Towards Marriage? Attitudes Towards Marriage and Relationships among University-Educated British Muslim Women</i>	Dr. Fauzia Ahmad
4:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m	Refreshments	
4:30 p.m to 5:30 p.m	<i>'There are not many men who are practicing. They tend to hold more onto the culture': British Pakistani Women, Islamic Piety and Family"</i>	Dr. Jody Mellor
7:30 p.m. onwards	Dinner at La Lupa, 155 Cowbridge Road East. CF11 9AH 029 2022 3697	

<b>Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010</b>		
9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m	<i>Kerala Muslim Marriage, Intimacy and Gendering as Produced through Islamic Reformism, Transnational Connections and Neoliberalism</i>	Dr. Caroline Osella
10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m	<i>Islam, Muslim Societies and the Study of Religion &amp; Identity in Diasporas</i>	Dr. Sean McLoughlin
11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m	Refreshments	
12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m	Closing discussion, chaired by Prof. Shelley Feldman	
1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m	Lunch and Close of conference	

## **Abstracts**

### **Friday Afternoon**

#### **Modernist Islam in Bangladesh and the UK: The Background to Our Study**

*Prof. Geoffrey Samuel (Cardiff University)*

A key issue in our project is the impact of what we have called 'modernist Islamic movements' on young people. 'Modernist' is a problematic term here, as are most alternatives. We chose it deliberately, however, to highlight the extent to which today's Islamic movements, whether 'Islamist,' 'pietist,' 'fundamentalist,' 'neo-fundamentalist,' socially conservative or liberal, openly political or not, operate within the same contemporary

environments as other social, political and religious movements, and respond to similar issues and concerns. Several of these movements too, such as the Tablighi Jama'at, are increasingly active on a global scale, and have to be understood at least in part in global terms. At the same time, while many of the same modernist Islamic movements operate in some form both in Bangladesh and in the UK, there are obvious differences in the social and political context of Islam in these two countries. In this paper, I attempt to sketch these differences and to provide some initial analysis of the consequences for the situation of young Bangladeshis in these two overall contexts.

### **Film: Every Good Marriage Begins With Tears (2006)**

*Directed and Produced by Simon Chambers*

Hushnara is a bride-to-be who has cold feet on the eve of her big day. Her sister, Shahanara, has already tied the knot, but she is far more Westernised than her Islamic village-boy husband from Bangladesh, and the marriage already looks shaky after only two weeks. Their father wants to see the girls settled, and their eldest sister urges them to fulfil their duty to the family. All the elements are in place for a crackling movie about reluctant brides and intractable elders. Only, Simon Chambers's 'Every Good Marriage Begins with Tears' is a documentary about real people and their unscripted attempts to balance their individual desires with social expectations. Shahanara and Hushnara are the children of Bangladeshi immigrants from London. Chambers was as a social worker for 14 years, and the family trusted him enough to let him record their most private squabbles and confessions. Chambers followed the sisters and other family members in London and Bangladesh, and has come up with a highly personal and intimate film about different attitudes to love across cultures and generations, which is at turns hilarious and deeply sad.

## **Saturday Morning**

### **Islamic Marriage: A Haven in an Uncertain World**

*Dr. Santi Rozario (Cardiff University)*

One of the appeals of Islamic marriage is the hope that it can provide security in an uncertain world, in which human relationships seem increasingly unstable and temporary. It shows how many young British Bangladeshis are concerned about the instability of marriage and human relationships in contemporary society, and how they see marriage to a partner who shares their Islamic commitments as more likely to endure than marriages where the partners (Muslim or otherwise) do not share a strong commitment to religious values. In a society where neither their parents' values, nor those of the wider culture around them, seem to offer a satisfactory solution, modernist Islamic movements provide both an ideology that offers a more convincing answer, and a community of people with shared values among whom both friendship and an enduring marital relationship can hopefully be found.

## **‘Marry into a Good Family’: The Changing Meanings of Transnational Family Capital and Muslim Identity for young Bangladeshi Muslims of the Diaspora**

*Dr. Nazli Kibria (Boston University)*

In this paper I draw on data from a study of Bangladeshi Muslims in the U.S. and U.K., to explore conflicts and gaps between parents and their marriage-age children about marriage. I suggest that in both contexts, these divisions reflect two intertwined conditions. The first are the changing meanings of transnational family capital in the diaspora. The second are the changing meanings of Muslim affiliation and identity in the diaspora. I suggest that the context of marriage decisions and negotiations brings these social dynamics to the forefront, making them visible and salient. Even as both of these conditions shape the experiences of Bangladeshi Muslim families in the U.S. and U.K., they also do so in somewhat different ways, reflecting different migration histories and national contexts. Besides considering these sources of variation, I will also explore gender differences. I suggest that the challenges of finding an appropriate marriage partner emerge differently for young women and men of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

## **Marriage, Partnership and ‘Islamic Life’: The Case of British Bangladeshi Youth**

*Bulbul Siddiqi (Cardiff University)*

Islamic rituals and practices have become important element of the everyday life of many of the British Bangladeshi in recent times. Following Islamic rituals become a common trend among them regardless their religiosity. This tradition keeps the primary tie with the ‘Islamic life style’. Many of the British Bangladeshi maintains this tie to keep these practices alive among their children. The parents want their kids to be familiar with the Islamic practices and rituals. On the other side, this tradition is already there for those who are practicing Muslim. In this sense, Islam seems essential factor for them who are more used to with ‘secular’ oriented life. Islamic practices and tradition have also become important on finding marriage partners as well among the younger generation of British Bangladeshi. The current paper deals with the issues of Islamic practices, especially where Islam fits in the lives of Bangladeshis in these different groups; when Islam is not the single most important element in people's lives. Moreover, it takes the account of the process of finding marriage partners among the Bangladeshi Muslim in the UK.

## **Saturday Afternoon**

### **Religion, Aesthetics and Self-Presentation: Photographs of Young Muslim Women on Match-Making Websites**

*Dr. Anna Piela (York University)*

Finding a suitable partner in a diasporic setting often proves challenging for young Muslims, especially those unable or not wanting to search within their kinship networks (Piela, 2009). Online match-making sites come to their aid, and it is a mark of their success that they are becoming increasingly popular (Lo and Aziz, 2009). As studies of Muslim matchmaking sites tend focus on the ever-popular topic of the headscarf and its associations in the match-making

context (see Zwick and Chelariu, 2006), a much more comprehensive study of the specificity of the online religious identities and self-representation is required. In particular, a study that would draw on the intertextuality of images and textual content comprising these online profiles would be helpful in achieving a better understanding of the multi-layered representations and constructions of identities and networks of young Muslims living in diaspora. Combining visual and textual methods, this paper looks at a number of images and profiles of young Muslim women using online match-making sites and discusses broad themes related to faith, ethnicity and identity that emerge in the analysis.

### **Graduating Towards Marriage? Attitudes towards Marriage and Relationships among University-Educated British Muslim Women**

*Dr. Fauzia Ahmad (Bristol University)*

This paper examines educated British South Asian Muslim women's conceptualisations and attitudes towards marriage, relationships and contemporary Muslim matrimonial practices, and their experiences of these processes. Drawing on detailed qualitative interviews with British Muslim women under-graduates and graduates of varying levels of self-professed religious observance, the research explored women's definitions of taken for granted terms such as 'arranged marriages', the diversity of methods employed to find a prospective partner, and changing attitudes towards marriage including perceived differences between religion and culture and notions of love and 'Islamic' or 'halal' relationships. The influence of higher education on Muslim women's marriage options, choices and opinions was also explored. While the possession of a degree was regarded as highly beneficial in terms of personal social mobility and financial security, and as a necessity and a key motivating factor in order to 'secure' an appropriate matrimonial match (Ahmad, 2001), this was coupled with difficulties experienced in meeting suitable partners and concerns around women's increasing ages, and being 'over-qualified' and high achieving. The paper concludes by arguing that the changing attitudes and differing conceptualisations of marriage among educated Muslim women and their families suggest that we move away from static terminologies such as 'arranged marriage' to one of 'assisted' marriage (ibid) in order to recognise marriage as a dynamic and fluid set of processes that are subject to continual negotiation and renegotiation that are contingent upon localised, personalised and transnational interpretations and influences.

### **"There are not many men who are practicing. They tend to hold more onto the culture": British Pakistani Women, Islamic Piety and Family.**

*Dr. Jody Mellor (Cardiff University)*

This article explores the significance of Islamic piety in relation to young British Pakistani women's preferences for, concerns about and experiences of the *rishta* (or marriage match). Based on semi-structured interviews with British Pakistani women, I explore the women's past, current and expected family negotiations, preferences and fears. I analyse the ways the women utilise textual based interpretations of Islam to challenge what they consider to be the 'cultural' or 'traditional' preferences of community members. I indicate that the women use Islamic piety as a resistance against parents' preferences for a *rishta*. However, I argue against the assumption that women's use of textual based interpretations of Islam necessarily allow them to claim greater rights. The article suggests that greater attention should be placed on how young women are listened to within the community and how the migrant generation respond to the women's demands.

## **Sunday Morning**

### **Kerala Muslim Marriage, Intimacy and Gendering as Produced Through Islamic Reformism, Transnational Connections and Neo-Liberalism**

*Dr. Caroline Osella (SOAS, University of London)*

This paper comes out of a project which was planted among Muslims from Kerala, south India, and is based on fieldwork both in Kerala and in the Gulf. Kerala's Muslims have a deep history of transnational circulation with the Gulf region: via intense traffic of people, money, things and ideas (past and present); via cultural imaginings which powerfully entangle the Gulf and Kerala and complicate the notion of border; and via contemporary transnational projects such as Islamic reformism. Kinship, marriage, household structure and expectations of intimacy are all undergoing rapid shifts and the paper focuses on these, as experienced by women. Many families are shifting away from old off-bazaar matrilineal large extended households and into small individual household units with patrilineal emphasis, often in new neighbourhoods. Other families choose to remain in the old Muslim area, building large properties and trying to re-constitute matrilineages – an option demanding considerable capital. This paper thinks through processes of change and influences as at work among transnational families. Examples include: new brides born and raised in Gulf states married back to Kerala and rapidly socialised into 'Kerala style', something which brides sometimes resist; married women who accompany their husbands who work or do business; stay-back wives who take visiting visas and spend six months in the gulf with their husbands; stay-back wives who know of the Gulf by hearsay and imaginings only; older women married to Arabs, who appear occasionally on visits to their natal families. I will also discuss various sites where the 'new family' is being produced. These include the boxes of consumer goods sent by absent husbands / fathers; wedding videos; women's consumption and leisure practices. I will also address ways in which the figure of the imagined other – the Arab woman – sometimes appears, most often as exemplar of moral lack and against whom the 'new Kerala Muslim woman' crafts herself.

### **Islam, Muslim Societies and the Study of Religion & Identity in Diasporas**

*Dr. Seán McLoughlin (Leeds University)*

This paper explores existing and developing agendas for the anthropological (and sociological) study of Islam in contemporary Muslim societies. It seeks to extend insights on the complex transformations of religion, culture and society in globalised modernity with respect to the study of Muslim diasporas in the West, most especially in terms of South Asian heritage diasporas in UK. My first concern is to think about Islam and Muslimness in such a way that allows: i) for the configuring power of social structure and ii) the efficacy of powerful discourses of history / tradition as Muslim habitus, as well as iii) the contextual improvisations of human agents with diverse social positions and cultural capitals. My second concern is to dwell more specifically on how Islam and Muslimness travel, how these formations alter and change as people remake their lives in 'multi-local' settings. I am interested in what they 'preserve', 'lose' and 'gain', and the impact of processes of cultural

translation and re-traditionalisation on their identifications and imaginaries, both territorial and extraterritorial. In light of the thematic focus of the conference, it is hoped that this paper will illuminate some of the scales and dynamics of the broad contexts within which young Muslims of South Asian heritage are now operating. For example, in terms of the individual and institutions close to home, the nation-state and wider transnational public spheres.

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### **BAHAR Website**

<http://www.bodyhealthreligion.org.uk/BAHAR/>